The Golden Enemy

Alexander Key

Author of *Escape to Witch Mountain*

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To the slowly vanishing ones of forest and field, who have treated their planet —and their fellow creatures—so much better than has the creature called man.

Something About a Star

The youngest herder paused a moment in the early dark, listening, not sure of the sound that had come to him. It had been so very faint, so far away. Was it the hunting horn again?

Suddenly he turned and raced up the grassy slope to where the oldest herder stood waiting.

"Did—did you hear it?" he panted. "Was it the horn?"

"Sounded like it," replied the oldest herder. "But I heard only one blast—and it was farther to the west this time. That means they're still following the beast."

"Won't they ever catch up with it?"

"They're in rough country now, and they can't do much at night. It could escape."

The youngest herder said bitterly, "I wish I'd gone with them! If that thing gets away —"

"You're not a hunter, son. Your place is here."

"But it killed my dog!"

"That wasn't all it killed."

The youngest herder stood clenching his brown hands as he thought of the terror of the night before. It had crept down in the safety of the mist, unseen, and slashed viciously through the flock as if its one purpose was to kill. Their weapons had been useless. Of the dogs, only Pilot had had the courage to attack—and poor old Pilot hadn't lasted a minute. Afterward, as soon as the mist lifted, he'd gone for the hunters. Now here it was night again, and the men were still after the thing.

"Why," he asked, "would any animal act so—so mad? As if it just wanted to destroy."

"There are reasons, son, but you're not ready to hear them yet. You're too full of hate."

"Why shouldn't I hate it? I wish I could kill it."

"Killing it wouldn't bring your dog back."

"Maybe not, but I'd feel better."

"Would you now?"

The youngest herder swallowed. As he thought of Pilot, whom he would never see again, tears rolled down his cheeks. Suddenly the aching hurt of it was almost more than he could bear. Pilot had been his only real friend. How could he ever manage without him?

After a long while he dug his knuckles into his eyes and looked up. There was no mist tonight, and the stars were as bright as he had ever seen them. Directly ahead, rising over the hills, was a star he had never noticed before. It didn't have the cold diamond glitter of the others. It was a warm star, a friendly one, with something about

it that seemed to ease the ache within him.

He pointed to it and asked its name.

The oldest herder shook his head, and said quietly, "Why don't you give it a name and call it your own? It looks like a good star, the kind one needs on a lonely night."

"*Would there be—people out there? People like us?*"

"*Why not? We came from the stars, long ago—from a planet like this one. If that star has such a planet, surely man will be living there.*"

"*And would there be beasts there too? Beasts that hate us?*"

"*Maybe. Unless man has destroyed them all—or made his peace with them.*"

"*Made peace with them!" the youngest herder exclaimed. "But that's impossible! How can you make peace with something as murderous as the thing that came last night?*"

"*You can't—unless you can understand how it feels, and why.*"

The oldest herder started back to camp, then stopped a moment and added over his shoulder, "Look at your star while I'm gone, and do a little wondering. I've found a lot of answers that way."

The youngest herder watched him move down the slope. Finally, he raised his eyes to the star that now hung like a glowing jewel above the opposite hill.

Would there really be people out there? People like himself? And would there be animals, too? Dogs—and beasts that killed?

1

FOOTPRINT

On the green planet that circled the youngest herder's star, the forest stretched like a great park over much of the land. Ancient trails led through it, but these days no one except Boy Jaim ever bothered to travel far upon them. Why walk, people said, when it is so easy to fly above it all? But to Boy Jaim—he was looked upon as something of a savage—the forest was a place of endless mystery, and he managed to spend more time in it than at home.

Because he spoke the language of the wild, and knew every creature for miles around, it came as a great shock, one morning, suddenly to discover that the forest had turned unfriendly.

When it happened, he was returning from the edge of a desert area called the Barrens, where he had been exploring. Behind him, floating at the end of a short line, was an air sled loaded with camping gear. A small white dog, one of the few dogs left on the planet, trotted watchfully ahead, on the alert for prankish squirrels who liked to tease them by throwing nuts. Boy Jaim, this morning, was paying no attention to his surroundings. His mind was still on the Barrens and some of the odd things he had found; he did not realize anything was wrong until the dog stopped and gave a low growl of warning.

The youth halted in surprise. He had long outgrown the first part of his name, which had been added when he was small to distinguish him from his father. But though Big Jaim was dead now, the tall son was still Boy Jaim to everyone, and no one thought of changing it.

"What's the matter, Doubtful?" he asked.

The dog stood with head raised, his sharp nose quivering. "Don't know," he replied, speaking with a muttered flow of sounds that few but Boy Jaim himself could have understood. "Too quiet. The birds have stopped singing."

"What of it? The birds can't sing all the time."

"But something's wrong," Doubtful insisted. "Gives me a queer feeling."

Frowning, though still unworried, Boy Jaim stood listening while he studied the surrounding woods. The trail they were following had once been a highway, but that was millenniums ago in the day of the wheel. Now great trees covered the ages-old gash through the land, and there remained only a winding path kept open by the hooves of deer. On either side the woods stretched open and park-like into the distance, with an occasional grassy glade where the sunlight slanted down and the forest dwellers came to feed and play.

Turning, he felt sunlight on his bare shoulders, and he realized they'd reached the edge of such a glade. It was one he remembered well. Days ago, when they'd passed through here, the place had been alive with happy creatures. This morning it was strangely empty.

Then his heart gave a sudden twist as he glimpsed, in the distance, the fleeing forms of several deer. The last one halted a moment and looked back, almost regretfully it seemed. It was a white doe.

The white doe was an old friend.

"Wait!" he called, holding out his hands. "What's the matter? Wait! …"

The doe's only response was to whirl about and vanish with the others.

Incredulous, Boy Jaim stood blinking at the silent forest. Never, never in all his life, had anything run from him except in play. Why should the deer flee now—especially the white doe? What had happened to the other creatures? Always there'd been squirrels about, full of devilment, and small inquisitive black bears who liked to meet him on the trail, to gossip a bit and beg for a honeycake. But not one had appeared this morning.

"I can't understand it," he muttered to Doubtful. "What's got into everything?"

The dog rolled his big amber eyes, looking uneasily from one side to the other. "It's something in the air. Can't you *feel* it?"

Suddenly Boy Jaim shivered. It was almost as if an icy wind had blown through the forest, destroying all that was warm and good. Only, there wasn't even a breeze this morning, and the day was so balmy he hadn't bothered to put on his jacket. Yet the coldness was here, and in it lay a blackness that was almost —was it evil?

He closed his eyes and sent his thoughts reaching out, searching. Now he stood motionless for long seconds, a thin, brown, and intense young figure, man-tall despite his youth, with black hair bushing from under the brightness of his cap. All his clothing, from his green-tasseled cap to his short sturdy brown boots, was from material designed and woven by his cousin, L'Mara, on the looms at home.

His exploring thoughts told him only that the source of what he felt was nowhere near. He began to wonder if evil was the right name for it. From the few books he'd read of the dim past, when man had overrun the planet, there had been evil aplenty. But all that was long ago. Incredibly long ago. Man had changed a lot since those times. Now his numbers were few, and neither man nor beast had harmed each other for ages.

What could have happened here today?

"Come on," he said abruptly. "Let's go see Grumble. She'll tell us what's wrong."

Doubtful gave a small grunt of disagreement, but said nothing till they neared the great hollow tree that Grumble and her cub used for a den. Then he held back, muttering, "Careful. She may be feeling mean."

"Aw, she's just fussy because she has a cub. She's still the friendliest bear around here."

"You'll see. Don't forget the honeycakes."

"Oh."

He reached into the air sled and got out the remaining cakes he'd saved especially for Grumble's cub. He'd given it some last week, and promised it more when he returned.

He did not immediately see Grumble after he called out a greeting, but the cub appeared farther down the trail and stood looking at him uncertainly. In its bright, beady little eyes was a curious new mixture of wonder and fear.

Boy Jaim was startled and not a little upset by the cub's strange manner. It had

never stayed away from him before. He stooped and held out a honeycake. The cub eyed it wistfully, but refused to come closer.

"What's wrong, Fuzzy?" he pleaded. "You're not really afraid of me, are you? Surely you know I'd never hurt you!"

"You might," the cub replied tremulously, its churning thoughts saying more than it could express in sound.

"But why?" he exclaimed, astounded. "You don't believe that, do you?"

"Yes. You're a man-thing."

"But man-things are your friends!"

"No. Man-things are bad."

"Who told you that?" he demanded.

"Oh, it was big, *big!* And shining! Didn't you *see* it when—"

They were interrupted by Grumble, who charged suddenly from the trees beyond the den. She slapped the cub and sent it squealing away, and then knocked the offered cakes from Boy Jaim's hand. Her warning snarl told him he was no longer welcome there.

He retreated from her, shocked and trembling, and fled down the trail.

It was long minutes before he calmed enough to think carefully over what had happened and attempt to understand it. But it was all so new in his experience, and so incredible, that none of it made sense.

He realized now that it wasn't just the deer and Grumble and her cub who had turned from him. It was everything in this part of the forest. He was aware of hidden creatures watching him, suspicious and distrustful. They no longer wanted anything to do with him—and it was all because he was a man-thing.

"Why?" he cried to Doubtful. "What have they got against man?"

"I wouldn't know," the dog mumbled worriedly. "My kind has always thought very highly of your kind. But something has been through here …"

"Something big and bright-colored that frightened all the creatures and changed how they think. What can it be?"

"Can't figure that one."

"But didn't you smell something strange back there?"

"Thought I did once. It was way off, and faint."

"What was it like?"

"Too faint to tell. Just a whiff of wild."

"Wild? Everything around here is wild."

"Not like that," Doubtful said uneasily. "What I whiffed was *wild* wild, like nothing I'd ever want to meet. So maybe I didn't really whiff anything. I hope not."

"You whiffed something," Boy Jaim said. "Something very big and very bad—because that's the kind of something that came through here. But what was it?"

"Why ask me? There's no such creature. Except when I dream. I've always dreamed and whiffed things that don't exist. Maybe we've both been dreaming."

"It would make better sense. Only, Grumble wasn't dreaming. Nor was her cub." Boy Jaim halted and shook his head.

They had reached the edge of a deep stream that ran swift and clear between high rocky banks lined with immense trees. The trail forked here, with each fork going to distant spots that could be safely forded. In ancient times a bridge had spanned the foaming rush of water directly ahead, but the only sign of it now

was a stained patch of rock where steel beams might once have been anchored.

He had planned to camp near here and catch fish for their lunch—a practice rather looked down upon now that man had outgrown his early urge for meat—but he had lost all desire for food. For the first time he was beginning to feel fear. The only large creatures on the planet—except the whales in the sea—were the bears, the deer, and the goats. Grumble herself was the biggest thing around, and even she wasn't very big.

Could the forest have been visited by a phantom?

He was almost willing to believe it, because poor Doubtful, who had terrible racial memories, was always dreaming about such things. Doubtful would often mutter and moan in his sleep, and wake up trembling to say that some horror had been after him. Something flesh-eating out of the past.

With a start, Boy Jaim realized that Doubtful was trembling now, and that the hair on the back of his neck was standing up straight.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he whispered.

"I whiff it again!" the dog told him. "And it's really *wild* wild. I mean *bad*."

"Is the thing close?"

"Don't think so—but it's been past here. Last night, maybe, or early this morning."

Doubtful moved hesitantly forward, then began working his way down around the rocks to a strip of sand at the water's edge. Abruptly he stiffened, and a low growl came from his throat.

With the air sled bobbing behind him on its line, Boy Jaim hastened down beside the dog. Now he could make out what the projecting rocks had hidden. His eyes widened. He gasped.

In the narrow strip of sand, clearly defined, was one impossibly large footprint pointing toward the river. A portion of a second print was still visible at the water's edge. By their shape a bear might have made them—but surely so monstrous a bear had never existed. Yet before him was the evidence of the prints. They were real.

"Great thunder above!" he whispered, awed.

He looked carefully around for prints leading out of the water. Seeing none, he realized the creature must have crossed the river here. He shook his head in amazement. Only a beast of incredible size and strength would have dared this dangerous stretch.

Where was the thing going?

He shivered as he studied the silent forest across the river. It had never looked forbidding before. Now it was a place of darkness and fear. But home lay in that direction. On foot, home was more than a day's journey ahead, though it could be reached in an hour or so by using the air sled.

Suddenly he drew the sled to him and motioned to Doubtful. "Get aboard. The hike's over."

"We flying home?"

He nodded and snapped a safety line around Doubtful's small white body. "But not until we've located that—that beast. We've got to find it first, and learn all we can about it."

Doubtful rolled his amber eyes unhappily. "I was afraid of that. Don't I meet phantoms enough in my sleep?"

As they rose and flew slowly across the river, he was suddenly thankful that his uncle, Andru, and the others had insisted that he take an air sled on the trip.

The day he mentioned going to the Barrens again, Andru had looked at him curiously a moment, then turned away with a little shake of his long gray head. It was the sort of reaction that everyone had when he spoke of going to the place. A visit to the Barrens was part of one's education, but one always went with a group, with someone like Emmon the Elder along to explain what was known of it. For most people one visit was enough. As for returning to it, alone …

"I suppose it's in your blood," Andru told him. "Wanting to do the things you do. Just like Big Jaim. Well, this time I'd suggest you take one of the larger sleds —"

"But I planned to go on foot, sir."

"On foot! Good heavens, why make it so hard for yourself?"

"Well, you miss things by *flying* over them," he explained. "I want to follow one of the old trails all the way and see what I can locate."

"But that will take weeks. How can you carry your camping equipment and enough extra food—"

"I wouldn't bother with carrying food, except some cakes for the bears. I'd rather live off the land."

"Oh," said Andru, who would have starved in the woods, even though he was one of the leading thinkers in the Five Communities. "Tell me, what in the world do you eat? Roots and things?"

Boy Jaim glanced across the room at his small cousin, L'Mara, who was busy at one of the looms. Suddenly uncomfortable, he said, "Well, you can find lots of wild food this time of the year. The plums and berries are getting ripe, and what with the mushrooms and asparagus—"

"*Fish eater!*" said L'Mara, so distinctly that for a moment it seemed she'd spoken aloud. His ears burned. Then he realized she was merely teasing him with a thought, for her lips hadn't moved. With her big bright eyes, her coloring and quick movements, she reminded him of a mischievous little squirrel, or maybe a chipmunk.

"*You've eaten it too—and liked it!*" he flung back at her silently, and marveled at the fact that they were the only ones in the family who could communicate like this. Usually, if a person had the ability—and it was not uncommon in the Five Communities—everyone closely related to him would also have it to some degree. But Andru didn't have even a touch of it, nor did Tira, his wife. His own parents hadn't had it—a lack that probably had cost them their lives, for when they failed to return from a trip years ago, no one knew what had happened or where to search for them.

L'Mara, intent on her weaving, said, "*I ate it only to please you, and I think it's horrid. It made me feel almost like a cannibal.*"

He knew she was still teasing by the impish look on her face, but before he could think of a retort, her mother, Tira, came in with a basket of new yarn for the other loom. She was a striking woman, with long, shining hair that was almost the color of gold. No one else in the Five Communities had hair that color. L'Mara's hair was bronze.

"Boy Jaim," Tira said. "What's this about walking to the Barrens?"

When he explained, she said, “Now you’re just being silly. If you want to walk part of the way to that awful place, then walk—but at least tow a small sled to carry things. After all, as long as a sled floats, it’s weightless, no matter what you pile on it. Suppose you found something there you wanted to bring home?”

Andru snorted. “He won’t find anything worth keeping. The inhabitants of that place were demented. Absolutely demented.”

L’Mara said silently, “*I think Father’s wrong, at least partly, and that you could really find something wonderful if you look in the right spot. Please, bring me a present.*”

Her request decided him. He compromised finally on one of the smallest sleds; it had just enough power in its antigravity unit to lift Doubtful and himself and carry all their equipment. The next morning, before he left, L’Mara gave him his new cap. Though she was still a child, she was the best designer and weaver in their community, and the cap she had made was a marvel of patterning. Around its wide green band was an intricate design of leaping fish. She managed to present it to him without a flicker of a smile.

With the safety belt fastened around his waist, Boy Jaim lay flat on the air sled and peered over the bow at the forest below. The river was well behind them now and they were moving slowly southward, just above the treetops. The sled, he knew, was overloaded with the things he had found, and it was a heavy drain on the solar batteries to keep so much weight aloft. If the sunlight lasted, the batteries should recharge. It was disturbing, though, to see the mounting clouds drifting toward them from the east. The sled was too small to be caught in stormy weather.

“Do you whiff anything yet?” he asked Doubtful.

“It’s hard to whiff anything up here. But this seems to be the right direction.”

“Maybe we’d better get down near the ground, just to make sure.”

“Please,” the dog begged. “It wouldn’t be safe.”

“It would be safe enough for you. That beast hasn’t hurt anything.”

“It hasn’t hurt anything wild—but I’m not wild. My kind has lived with your kind too long. If it hates man, it would hate me.”

In spite of the day’s warmth Boy Jaim shivered. He had never felt like this before. Why would the thing hate man?

“If I could just get a look at it …” he muttered.

“Do we have to?” Doubtful asked unhappily. “We already know what it looks like.”

“All we know is that it left a footprint like a bear, only the print was far too big. If it’s a bear, it would stand as high as three men. And it isn’t black like a bear, because the cub said it was shining.”

“Isn’t that enough?” grumbled the dog. “It whiffs like a bear, so that’s what it is—a shining monster of a bear, which makes it a phantom. I think we ought to forget the thing and go home.”

“But we can’t do that. I’ve got to find it, and—and try to talk to it.”

“*Talk* to it? Oh, no!”

“But I’ve *got* to. Don’t you understand? Everything in the forest has been friendly until now. Why, it’s been ages since humans and other creatures—”

He was interrupted by a sudden questioning thought from L’Mara, calling from

home. "*Boy Jaim, where are you? Is anything wrong?*"

For safety's sake he always kept in touch with her when he was away, but at the moment all thought of her had been driven from his mind. "*I'm all right,*" he told her. "*We're flying south of the river now, so we'll be back soon—if it doesn't turn too stormy.*"

"*But I know something's wrong. What is it?*"

"*It's nothing for you to worry about. I'll explain later.*"

"*Did you forget to bring me a present?*"

This was the first time she had mentioned it since he had left. "*I found something for you,*" he replied.

"*Oh, what is it? Please tell me!*"

"*I don't know,*" he admitted. "*But maybe Emmon can tell us. Meet me there this afternoon.*"

He glanced up at the approaching cloud bank, which was uncomfortably close. Then he forgot it when he saw the nearness of the trees.

The overloaded air sled had been using more and more power to stay aloft. Now, as he tried to send it higher, there was no response. Suddenly he realized the solar batteries were not recharging fast enough to make up for the extra drain upon them.

Doubtful gave a yip of fright as the sled brushed the top of a tree and tilted downward. "Oof! What's wrong?"

"Power's failing—we've got to land." He looked frantically around for an open spot, but saw none.

They brushed through more leaves, scraped over a succession of limbs, and began drifting slowly into the shadows. They touched bow-first and settled lightly upon the deep leaf-mold that carpeted this part of the forest floor.

Even before they touched, Boy Jaim had ripped off his safety belt and turned to release Doubtful. The dog was trembling and the hair on his neck was standing up.

"Do you whiff it, Doubtful?"

"Yes—strong! What are we going to do?"

The youngest herder sat up with a start, not sure whether he had been dozing and dreaming, or simply imagining things. For a moment it seemed that his star really had a planet, and that he had been given a close look at it. Had he glimpsed people there like himself, and familiar creatures? …

He decided he had only imagined it, but it didn't matter. He could pretend it was real. It helped to believe there might be another like himself out there … someone with the same thoughts and feelings, perhaps with troubles like his own …

If it were man's old planet, there might be dangerous creatures on it, things that hated man.

Only, hatred had to have a reason …

2

ENEMY

The first thing to do, Boy Jaim knew instantly, was to get away from this part of the forest, fast. The sled had hardly touched down when he snatched up the towline and leaped from it. Fear, a shattering sort of fear like nothing he'd ever felt before, sent him racing away over the tangle of creepers and fallen leaves, with the white dog scrambling beside him. The air sled, afloat again after being released of their weight, bounced erratically along behind him, scraping against trees and windfalls. It caught finally on a low-hanging limb and jerked him to a stop.

Trembling, he managed to free it, then crouched beside it while he fought down the panic that had seized him. The small dog pressed close for comfort. This, Boy Jaim thought, was like living through one of poor Doubtful's nightmares.

"Can you still whiff the thing?" he whispered finally.

"Yes," said Doubtful, pointing with his nose. "It—it's off in yonder."

His arm tightened around Doubtful while he studied the surrounding shadows. Somewhere, surely, there must be a sunny glade where the sled's batteries could recharge. The entire deck and sides were made up of solar cells, most of which had been covered far too long by his equipment. But an hour in the sunlight, with everything removed, should bring the power up again. That is, if there was any sunlight to be found.

They were in one of the most tangled areas he had ever seen. Only little speckles of light dappled the gloom, though far off on his right he made out a faint pencil of brightness that might be the sun beating into a glade. But even as he saw it, the brightness vanished and the speckles of light around them faded.

The clouds had come. It chilled him to realize that the sun might not shine again today.

A sudden crashing somewhere in the direction Doubtful had pointed sent a new stab of fright through him. The hackles on Doubtful's neck rose again. Earlier, when the sled had been working, Boy Jaim hadn't minded the prospect of meeting the creature. Now, in their helplessness, the very thought that it might discover them was terrifying.

"Let's get going," he whispered. "Quiet …"

Stealthily they began creeping away. Where they had once run blindly in panic, they now inched forward, careful of every movement. From high overhead came a faint rushing of wind. The forest darkened and the rushing increased, masking the progress of their footsteps. But the wind and the deepening gloom only added to Boy Jaim's dread. His eyes roved continually, watching the shadows for a phantom shape that might overwhelm them at any moment.

It was long later when he felt a spattering of cold rain on his shoulders and found they'd reached the first open glade. Hurriedly he drew on his jacket, then glanced upward at the patch of dark gray sky high above. Both wind and rain had eased momentarily, but the heavens seemed ready to explode any second. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Doubtful, he saw, was standing with hackles raised and teeth bared in defiance —futile defiance of something unseen and unheard, whose exact location could only be guessed. Yet its terrible presence could be felt.

All at once Boy Jaim wondered whether the sled would carry Doubtful and himself if he removed everything on deck. The heaviest part of the load was the bag containing the things he'd found at the Barrens. This part of the forest was strange to him though, and if he left the bag here, how could he ever find it again? The objects were priceless. To lose them was unthinkable.

Then he remembered the smoke signals Andru had insisted he always carry. He'd never had to use any, but one signal would give a steady stream of smoke for a full day—unless it rained.

He was wondering how he could keep one smoking through a storm when L'Mara called him again.

"*Boy Jaim—Where are you now?*"

"*Down in the woods. Where are you?*"

"*Hunting you in the big sled—and don't tell me nothing's wrong, 'cause I know better. How can I find you?*"

"*Keep away from me!*" he ordered in alarm. "*It's not safe here!*"

"*If you don't tell me where you are, I'll keep flying around till I find you—and I'm not going home till I do. So there!*"

A sudden violent flash of lightning made him stop arguing with her and begin searching frantically for the box of smoke signals. He found it, tore it open, and hurriedly touched a lighter to one of the sticks. L'Mara had no business flying around in stormy weather, but she was as stubborn as a billy goat and he knew she meant exactly what she'd told him.

As the smoke boiled upward from the glade, he called to her again, then prayed that the rain would hold off until she arrived. The rain came first, and in such a blinding deluge that the signal was immediately extinguished. But L'Mara must have noted its location carefully, for soon the large covered sled appeared overhead and descended cautiously.

He was ready for her, waiting with the precious bag in his hand. The moment the big sled was close enough he heaved the bag over the stern, tossed Doubtful after it, and scrambled aboard with the towline of the small sled.

"Get away from here!" he cried, looping the line over a cleat. "Hurry!"

As they shot upward he crouched in the stern and stared down into the dimness of the glade. There was an instant when something huge seemed to take form at the spot where he had been, but it may have been only an illusion caused by the rain. Or his imagination.

The next moment they were over the forest and swinging in a long curve southward to avoid the storm. He shook the rain from his clothes and crept into the cabin.

L'Mara flashed him a wide-eyed look like a frightened squirrel, and her small mouth trembled with a rush of unspoken questions. He shook his head and

wiped moisture from his face with a hand that was far from steady.

"You ought to have better sense than to be out in this kind of weather," he growled at her, merely to be saying something aloud. "If Andru knew about it—"

"He's not home," she snapped. "And anyhow I'm old enough to know what I'm doing. So there!"

"Well, thanks for picking me up. If you hadn't come when you did … My sled was down, and that thing—"

"What *was* it down there?" she burst out suddenly. "A—a sort of bear?"

There was no use trying to hide anything from her. Their minds were so closely adjusted that fears as well as thoughts could be communicated, often without their even trying.

"I don't know," he muttered, shaking his head. "It had a footprint like a bear, but the print was huge. Doubtful said it had the scent of a bear, only—"

"It was a phantom," Doubtful mumbled. "I've seen things like it in my sleep."

"Father won't believe this," she said presently, after she had heard what had happened. "Why should *all* the creatures turn against us? It—it's just plain crazy!"

"I want to talk it over with Emmon," he told her. "Let's head straight there."

Remembering her present, he opened the heavy sack and took out something carefully wrapped in his rain jacket. It was the only ceramic object he had found, and he had wrapped it for protection from the other treasures, all of which were of metal. How it had survived the terrible forces of the remote past was a miracle, for nothing like it had ever been discovered. It represented a small, tan, fluffy-haired creature with erect ears and great wondering green eyes.

L'Mara squealed with quick delight. "Oh! Isn't it *beauti*ful! What *is* it?"

Boy Jaim shrugged. "Doubtful says he's chased something like it in his dreams. Emmon ought to be able to tell us about it. He has all the records on extinct creatures."

The sky remained overcast, but presently they were out of the storm area and flying over the hills and meadows west of the Five Communities. Usually the meadows were dotted with mixed herds of deer and fleecy-haired goats, but today the deer had vanished. The few goats in sight were huddled in the orchards near the scattered dwellings.

Boy Jaim peered down, wondering at the goats, then forgot them momentarily as the sun broke through the clouds and glinted on a hill far ahead. The entire hill was terraced for orchards and gardens. Through the trees at the top shone the red-tiled roof of an ancient house where the community's teacher, Emmon the Elder, had been gathering his scraps of wisdom and passing them on again, for longer than anyone could remember.

Most of the neat, whitewashed homes in the Five Communities were strung through the valleys on winding, crisscrossing paths that followed the stone walls. The walls were everywhere. Built to keep out grazing animals, they surrounded the small fields and the lush gardens in which the houses nestled, and wound all the way to the top of old Emmon's hill.

The Elder's stepped gardens, tended mainly by his pupils, usually gave forth a pleasant medley of bee drone, birdsong, and splash of water from the many springs. Today no birds were singing, and there was a discordant new sound Boy

Jaim had not heard there before. It came from the closed gate near the bottom of the hill—the worried baa-baa-a-ing of goats demanding attention.

After landing on the upper terrace he stood a moment trying to ignore the goats, pretending he could hear only the bees, the music of the water, and the other little familiar sounds that were part of his happy, peaceful world. He loved it all, and wanted life to go on just as it was. Why couldn't it?

Then his brown face tightened, and he got his bag and followed L'Mara past the row of moored air sleds to the entrance.

Just inside the doorway he paused uncertainly and set the bag down. He had not expected, this early in the afternoon, to find the place full of Emmon's pupils. They always made him feel uncomfortable. All of them, small L'Mara included, could assemble a sled unit—a puzzle that still gave him difficulties—or repair the tricky solar machines that relieved everyone from drudgery.

It never occurred to him that he had talents the others did not possess. He stood biting his lip, listening to Emmon's sharp voice in the big room beyond.

The Elder was a shriveled little gnomelike man, egg bald, white-bearded, and frail as a feather. Even so, he seemed to have boundless energy. "It has happened before," he was saying, warming to one of his favorite subjects. "And it will happen again. Almost without warning—unless we learn to read the signs. Many things could cause it: a slight wobbling of the planet, a shifting of its core, or even a cloud of cosmic dust. Hal Suppose our sun ran into such a cloud—what would become of us?" He jabbed a finger at a listener. "You tell us, Betta."

"We—we'd freeze," said the girl.

"Quickly?"

"Well, it depends. On the size of the cloud, I mean, and how dense it was. If it was a thin cloud, I suppose it would just slowly get colder, and we'd have another ice age. But that wouldn't be half as bad as what would happen if, well, if the earth's core shifted."

"Explain yourself."

"Well, that would be just awful. I mean, it would start earthquakes and volcanoes, and the earth's crust would buckle and the oceans would pour over the land. And at the same time there'd be terrible winds that would turn the air over and chill it in space, and the temperature would drop hundreds of degrees in almost no time—"

"Hey, we'd freeze in seconds!" one of the boys exclaimed. "Has that ever really happened—just like that, I mean?"

"Of course it's happened!" old Emmon said sharply. "That's what I'm trying to impress upon you, Hiras. It must have happened several times in the past, changing the planet greatly. Naturally there was terrible destruction of life."

"Is that what killed off the ancients at the Barrens?" Hiras asked.

L'Mara said, "I read that a meteor killed them off, but I don't believe it. I always had a feeling they were just plain murderous, though Father thinks they were demented. Could so many people be demented?"

"Ha!" said the Elder. "Possibly. It's all a point of view. In one sense they almost had to be demented to live in those ghastly beehives of cities, roaring around on wheels, and to be forever so incredibly busy—though heaven knows what they were so busy about. No one has ever learned." He shook his head. "However, many things happened at the Barrens. But what with continents

changing and sinking, and the polar ice melting and flooding things, we've few records left to help us. We may never know the truth unless we learn to make better use of the Pool of Knowledge."

There was a sudden silence. Then young Hiras asked, "Is there really a Pool of Knowledge, sir?"

Old Emmon looked at him witheringly. "Where do you think inspiration comes from? Out of man's trifling little brain? Ha!" He pointed a trembling finger aloft. "All that ever has been, all that ever can be and will be, is forever out there waiting. We have only to learn to see it …"

He paused and peered around him. Suddenly he blinked and looked hard at L'Mara. "My dear girl, *what* is that object in your hands?"

It was evident that L'Mara had almost forgotten what she held. "I—I don't know, sir. I've been hoping you knew."

The Elder came forward. The others crowded around.

"Why, I declare!" he exclaimed. "It must be a cat!"

L'Mara looked at him blankly, and the Elder added, "A cat, my dear, is an extinct household pet. I have a description of one somewhere in the library. The creature was carnivorous, and some members of its family were exceedingly large and fierce." He shuddered slightly. "I consider it fortunate that all carnivorous creatures are extinct. There are the bears, of course, and a dog or two—but these days the worst thing they eat is fish."

"Don't forget about man," said L'Mara.

"Eh? Man?"

"Yes, sir. Wasn't he once a flesh eater? And he still eats fish sometimes."

"Please," the Elder begged, looking pained. "I find the subject revolting." Then, looking up, he noticed for the first time that Boy Jaim was standing in the doorway. "Well! So you're back again from your wandering. About time! Did you find this cat L'Mara has?"

Boy Jaim had been paying little attention to the conversation. His mind was on the goats. He could hear them faintly, far down at the bottom of the hill, and suddenly he knew what had happened. Emmon should be told about it—but not here, with so many others present.

Then he became aware that the Elder had spoken to him. "I—yes, sir," he managed to reply. "I found it at the Barrens. There are some other things, but they're all of metal. Bronze, I think."

"You found this cat at the Barrens?" said old Emmon, incredulous. "It's hard to believe! What's in the sack?"

Boy Jaim lifted the heavy sack and carried it to the Elder's desk. The class crowded close as he drew forth the largest and most unusual of the objects he had found. It was a human figure in curious clothing sitting astride a strange animal that was not unlike a deer, except that it was much larger and had no horns. Everyone gasped.

The Elder was almost dancing with delight. "A horse!" he squeaked, his voice nearly deserting him. "A horse with a rider! Behold, my friends, man's first means of transportation, before he invented things with wheels." He shook his head sadly. "Ah, what a marvelous creature the horse must have been! Imagine giving it up for those clumsy and complicated contraptions that needed roads to run on!"

"Why did he?" asked L'Mara.

"Because he was quite mad, of course. All ancient man seemed to care about was getting from one spot to another in a hurry. Don't ask me why, unless it was —Ah, what's this?"

Boy Jaim had placed two smaller and less perfect pieces of sculpture on the desk. Emmon scowled at the first. "I believe that was known as a pig," he muttered. "And this one—ah! One of the first domesticated creatures, extinct these thousands of years with the horse. The cow! It was from the cow that ancient man got his milk."

"Man also ate the cow, didn't he?" L'Mara asked. "Just as he did the pig?"

"We won't go into that," said the Elder. "Sometimes I doubt that such barbarous creatures were our true ancestors." He shrugged and his attention went to the handful of small metal discs that Boy Jaim had scooped from the bottom of the bag.

There was a sudden puzzled silence in the room. Boy Jaim said, "Is—is this what used to be known as wealth?"

"I believe," said Emmon, "that the right name for it is money."

"What was it for?"

"A medium of exchange," said Emmon. "I understand it was considered a good thing once. There were such vast numbers of people, you see, that life had become extremely complicated. Really, it passes belief. Anyway, when one needed food or clothes, he was unable to produce them as we do. He had to use money to buy them."

L'Mara frowned. "But suppose he didn't have any money?"

The Elder spread his hands. "I believe, to avoid going hungry or naked, he would have to borrow money—but for a price. As you can see, the system wasn't perfect."

"Stars, no!" L'Mara exclaimed. "Why, any greedy person with half sense would soon have most of the money, and all the others would be jumping for him."

"It would seem so," Emmon admitted. "Perhaps that's why ancient man was always in such a hurry. And it may explain why he had such concern for time. Why, everyone in his day carried a time instrument! Every blessed second was so valued—" He stopped and tilted his head. "What is that noise I keep hearing? Is it the bleating of goats?"

"Yes, sir," Boy Jaim replied uneasily. "There's a bunch of them down at the gate."

"For pity's sake, what do the silly creatures want?"

Boy Jaim didn't consider goats exactly silly. But they certainly were curious and stubborn enough, and they'd worked out things pretty well to suit themselves.

"I'm afraid they've got a problem, sir. They want to see you."

"I'm tired of their nonsense. They can just wait."

Boy Jaim knew Emmon could send and receive thoughts, though not too well. As clearly as he could, he thrust forth silently: "*Please, I think you'd better see them now. Something terrible has happened.*"

The Elder looked startled, then said to the others, "I want to discuss Boy Jaim's trip with him. Why don't the rest of you fix tea and pick something to eat from the garden? Take charge, Betta."

Boy Jaim followed him to the terrace, where Doubtful lay curled, pretending sleep. The Elder said, “Now what is this all about?”

“We—we’d better talk to the goats first, sir.”

Silently, with Doubtful following, they started down the winding path to the bottom of the hill. Boy Jaim, who had not eaten for hours, plucked eagerly at the ripe peaches growing beside the path and wondered how they were going to handle the goats. The goats, in exchange for milk and hair, were always making deals for special pastures to graze in. Their sly deals had long been a subject for much laughter, but there’d be nothing to laugh about this time …

The Elder said, “I can’t understand about those things you found. They must have been made by an earlier people than the wheel people. Such workmanship! Where did you locate them?”

For the moment Boy Jaim had lost all interest in his discoveries. But he described the deep cave-in he had stumbled across, and the dark opening that led into what may once have been a museum. He told how he’d found the things in the sand inside, but he did not mention the sudden dread that had come over him, and how he’d rushed out within minutes of having entered. Even Doubtful had been frightened and had insisted that the place was full of phantoms. The Barrens, of course, gave everyone the shivers, and it was no wonder that so little was actually known about it.

They were at the bottom of the hill now. Before them in the high stone wall was an ornate wooden gate. The path on the other side was jammed with goats. In their lead was a shaggy-haired billy with huge horns and a long gray beard that nearly touched the ground. He was known to everyone as Old Man.

“Well, what is it, Old Man?” the Elder said irritably. “Do you want a field of four-leafed clover this time, or will lettuce do?”

“We want protection,” Old Man bleated.

“Eh? Did you say protection?” said Emmon, who could understand only with great difficulty. “Talk to him, Boy Jaim. Find out what this is all about.”

Boy Jaim asked, “What are you afraid of?”

“The Golden One. You’ve heard of him?”

“I—I’ve heard of him,” Boy Jaim admitted, and felt a knot of coldness tighten in his stomach. “Why do you call him the Golden One? Have you seen him?”

“We have not seen him,” Old Man replied. “But others have, and we have been told. He is huge, and his hair is the same pale shining color as the hair of the woman where you live.”

“Like the hair of Tira, my aunt?”

“Yes. There is nothing else like it. And he is greatly to be feared, this Golden One. We demand that you give us protection.”

“You—you really believe that because he hates man you’re in danger too?”

The old billy stared back at him with cold unblinking eyes. “We have had too much business with man, far too long. With the taint of man on us, we cannot escape him.”

Emmon said querulously, “Does something hate man? What *is* the trouble?”

Boy Jaim took a deep breath, then told him.

The stars winked out with dawn, and again the youngest herder faced the reality of day. Suddenly, thinking of his lost dog, his hands clenched in rage at the beast that had killed it. Where were the hunters? Were they still after the thing?

He stood listening, hoping to hear the hunting horn. No sound came to him from over the hills. Then he thought of what the oldest herder had said about the star he'd been watching, and he shook his head. He'd done more imagining than wondering during the night, and no answers had come to him.

But questions were tumbling through his mind … questions about man and beast …

3

TIME OF TROUBLE

Doubtful's frenzied barking awoke Boy Jaim sometime during the night. As he sat up, he became aware of the frightened bleating of goats all around the house. He sprang from bed and rushed to the window. One quick look out over the moonlit valley was enough. shock went through him. The goats had fled their distant pastures and now were crowding madly down the valley paths, breaking open the gates and even, in places, scrambling over the walls into the imagined safety of the enclosures. They were already filling the garden, and they were probably down in the fields as well, trampling out the beans and corn.

He pulled on his trousers and boots and dashed down the stairway, shouting as he ran. As he reached the kitchen behind Doubtful he heard Andru's voice raised in alarm, but he did not wait. The damage that was being done to the gardens around the house was bad enough, but if too many goats got into the lower fields it would be a calamity. Most of their food for the coming year would be destroyed.

Outside, he raced through the courtyard, lined with sheds, storerooms, and greenhouses, and jerked open the door in the rear wall. The path beyond was jammed with moving goats, and he saw with dismay that they had already broken through the second gate and were streaming into the lower fields.

For a moment he stood paralyzed with indecision. How do you stop a goat invasion? Nothing like this had ever happened before. As far as he could see and hear there were bleating goats, with more pressing in behind them. Emmon had been upset when he'd heard of the great bear—badly upset, really—though he hadn't seemed to think the goats were in any immediate danger. The Elder had told Old Man to give him a little time and a solution could be worked out.

Only, Emmon admitted later, there wasn't much anyone could do to protect the goats. "Unless," he added, "Andru can think of something."

Andru, last evening, had been inclined to laugh at the whole thing.

"Did you actually see this fabulous creature?" Andru asked.

"All I saw was its footprint," he told his uncle. "But that was enough. If you'd been in the woods with me and seen how everything acted, or heard Old Man when he talked to Emmon and me …"

Boy Jaim would never forget the way Andru raised one eyebrow and slowly shook his long gray head. "Son, there's no such thing as a bear that size, in spite of what you think you saw. You're letting your imagination run away with you. As for the color—" Andru smiled, all at once, and added, "Oh, there could be a mutation, I suppose. That would produce the color, and of course everything would be afraid of it. Animals are so excitable. And those ridiculous goats …"

Even if Andru had taken the matter seriously, it wouldn't have prevented the

incredible thing that was happening now. The Golden One must have come all the way through the forest during the past few hours, and the goats had turned panicky.

How can you turn a flood of panicky goats?

Suddenly Boy Jaim dashed into one of the sheds facing the courtyard, snatched up a bundle of broom straw, found a jar of oil in the adjoining shop, and in another moment was running toward the goats, waving a blazing torch. Seconds later Andru was with him, waving another torch.

The goats, by their very numbers, were almost impossible to handle. It took every able-bodied person in the valley, working furiously with stick and torch until long after daybreak, to clear the fields and enclosures and erect temporary barricades until the breaks could be repaired. But by this time the valley was a shambles. Every growing thing in the fields had been trampled into the earth.

A half dozen of the nearest neighbors, including Tira's father and mother, had slumped down in Andru's main room. Grim, streaked with grime, they were almost too exhausted for speech. Boy Jaim helped L'Mara bring in tea and platters of bean cakes and cheese. For a while everyone ate silently.

Finally Andru muttered, "That such a thing could have happened! I wouldn't have believed it." Then he growled, "I never realized there were so many goats to plague us. Their numbers astound me. The Council ought to have most of them destroyed."

There were several shocked faces. Tira said sharply, "Andru! You don't mean that!"

"Goats! The way I feel about them now—"

"Civilized man doesn't take life," Tira reminded him. "Without them, what would we do for milk and cheese, and hair for weaving?"

"Pshaw," said Andru. "We can easily make all three from vegetable products. Anyway, you know it's only the fleecy-haired goats that give us milk and hair. Why put up with the rest of the stupid things?" He glared at the others. "Don't look so shocked. I speak as a man of science. We wouldn't tolerate inferior strains of beans and tubers in our plantings. Then why tolerate inferior creatures that lose their wits and turn destructive?"

"Andru," said Tira's father, a very tall man called Zimah, who did beautiful carvings in wood. "Our community has suffered great loss, and we're all badly upset about it. But why blame the poor goats? It was that bear that drove them here."

"Then the bear should be destroyed," Andru told him. "Only, I find this quite incredible. I just can't believe that any animal would actually do such a thing on purpose."

"I think this one did," said Zimah. "But without proof we'll have a hard time making the Council see it that way."

Andru's face hardened. "Well, I'm on the Council, and if that thing really is to blame …"

"Elder Emmon will know. He's been flying around since daylight, looking things over."

Boy Jaim, hunched dejectedly in a corner with his elbows on his knees, felt a coldness creep through him. How would the forest dwellers feel if man broke the

centuries-old peace that had been between them? Or didn't anyone care these days? Still, the Golden One had already broken that peace, and for no understandable reason …

There was a sudden murmur of expectancy around him, and his glance went quickly to the doorway. The shriveled, gnomelike figure of old Emmon was crossing the terrace. He watched the Elder come in and wearily settle his frail bones in a seat beside Andru.

"That impossible beast!" Emmon's voice was squeaky with strain. "For the life of me I can't imagine where he came from, or what he's got against us. But he's got a grievance of some kind."

"Grievance?" said Andru, his long face sharpening.

"Absolutely. Where do you think those goats went after we drove them out of West Com?"

"I'd hoped they'd keep going straight on over the hills. Didn't they?"

"No," said Emmon. "They turned toward South Com. And when they're driven from there, I'm quite sure they'll head for East Com, and finally for North Com or Central—wherever they'll do the most damage." He sighed and shook his head. "But everybody's been warned, and they're out putting up barriers now. So maybe the destruction won't be too great."

Andru stared at him. "Are you telling us that those confounded goats are actually being driven around the Five Communities?"

"I am. I haven't sighted the beast yet, but there's no doubt about what he's doing. There are dead goats in the pastures—strays that tried to get away when they were driven here. One of them was struck so hard" the Elder paused a moment, looking sick, "—that it landed high up in the branches of an oak tree."

There were gasps, followed by a shocked silence. Then Tira's mother, a thin, quiet woman named Malla, said solemnly, "It has begun."

"*What* has begun, Mother?" There was a note of fright in Tira's voice.

"The Time of Trouble. Everyone knows the prediction."

Boy Jaim had heard the prediction all his life. Where it had come from he didn't know, but it was one of those things people always repeated with a laugh because it seemed so silly. It didn't seem silly now, and the thought of it brought a sudden unpleasant prickling down his spine. *Man will be afflicted by hoof and claw, and there will follow a time of trouble …*

One of the neighbors grumbled, "Well, we've sure had it by hoof and claw. Maybe Malla's right."

"Malla's always right," Zimah muttered. "I think the Trouble has started."

Tira's frightened eyes turned to her father. Suddenly she cried, "Oh, this is a lot of nonsense! Why don't we forget what's happened and start planting again? If we hurry, surely there'll be time to raise another crop. Don't you think so, Andru?" She glanced at her husband.

"Yes," said Andru. "But first we'd better do something about that beast. Frankly, I'm flabbergasted by what we're up against. When Boy Jaim first told me—" He shook his head and went on, "We'll have to call an immediate meeting of the Council and decide what steps to take." He looked at Emmon. "Don't you think so, Elder?"

"That's the logical thing to do," old Emmon replied. "But I'm afraid," he added, spreading his thin hands, "that logic isn't going to help us now. We

cannot change what will be. It is in the stars."

Startled, Boy Jaim looked at him curiously. He heard his uncle say almost angrily, "Don't tell me, Elder, that you believe in that foolish prediction!"

"I'm not thinking of the prediction," old Emmon said mildly. "It's the stars I'm concerned about. I studied them last night, and I don't like what they tell me. We *are* in for trouble."

"What kind of trouble, Elder?"

"I don't know yet, Andru. But my advice is not to attempt a second planting this year. The seed will be wasted. If the goats damage some of the more important fields in the other communities, we cannot afford to waste a single handful of seed."

"But skies above," Andru protested, "we've plenty of dried stuff put away for emergencies. In a pinch we could use some of that for seed. To hear you talk, we're in for a famine!"

"We may be, Andru. All I know is that the planets and the stars are in positions they haven't been in for a millennium. Certain delicate balances are in danger of being upset. Almost anything can happen."

"After a goat invasion," Andru growled, "I'd say it's already happened. If we don't get rid of the devilish beast that's driving them, we'll have goats breaking into our houses next." He stood up grimly and added, "I'm going to call an immediate meeting of the Council."

Boy Jaim watched him stride into an alcove and begin stabbing at the buttons of a radiophone on the desk. A certain combination of buttons could send a signal to any other phone in the Five Communities, or alert all the phones at the same time. Andru said into the transmitter, "This is Councilman Andru of West Com making an emergency call. Please notify all Elders and Councilmen that an immediate meeting of the Council is requested. I repeat: This is Councilman Andru making an emergency call …"

Boy Jaim contrived to go with Emmon when they flew to the Council Hall at Central.

"Please don't fly straight there," he said. "Let's swing around over South Com and see if the goats have broken through the walls. We've time enough."

"Well …" Reluctantly the Elder turned southward. He muttered, "I think it's the bear you're concerned about, far more than the goats."

"Uh—yes, sir."

"You don't want him killed."

Boy Jaim burst out, "Do you think it's right to kill him before we find out what's wrong?"

"Certainly not. It's bad for man to kill. Very bad. But my personal feelings hardly matter. There are ten Elders, and twenty-five Councilmen. If all the Councilmen vote to kill the beast—and I'm sure they will—it will take all the Elders to turn them down. You know that will never happen."

"But—but couldn't you sort of delay things? I mean, if I just had time to talk to him, maybe—"

"Ha! Do you really believe you can talk to the creature?"

"I—I think so. Anyway, I can try."

"That might be very dangerous, my boy. If the Golden One will kill goats, he

probably will kill man if he has the chance. I've already warned everyone not to go walking far abroad until something is done. Great stars, do you realize the position we're all in? A strange and vicious animal, a killer, has appeared suddenly in our land. He threatens our very existence—and we don't even possess a weapon we can use to defend ourselves. We'll have to hurry and *make* something!"

Boy Jaim hadn't considered this side of it. Now, with a shock, he realized the Elder was right. The peace between man and beast had been in effect so long that it had hardly seemed possible the Five Communities could be in actual danger. But of course they were.

As for weapons …

It was a little hard to think about weapons, for people hadn't needed such things for ages. The ancients in the day of the wheel had used something called a gun, but he wasn't sure how it worked. The only gun he'd ever seen was an odd-looking relic in the museum at Central, so eaten with rust that only pieces of it remained. Andru had once said it was a laser, and that to make one like it would be a simple matter. Maybe so. But Andru often spent weeks making some complicated thing he called simple.

On the other hand lots of people, including L'Mara and himself, went in for archery. His West Com team, in fact, had beaten all the others. Target arrows wouldn't have much effect against a creature like the Golden One, but they'd be better than nothing in an emergency. It occurred to him that a sharp metal-tipped arrow, coated with poison, might be the easiest way to destroy the bear. It was a horrible thought, and instantly he blanked it from his mind for fear someone might pick it up.

"I've about decided," old Emmon was saying, "that the beast is demented. Has that occurred to you, Boy Jaim?"

"Why—why no, sir. It could be sort of crazy, but somehow I don't believe it is."

"Then why is it driving the goats? Why is it trying to plague us? What has it got against us? Hal I say the beast has a devilish bee in its bonnet—and that amounts to dementia."

"Well, it's sure got something in its bonnet," Boy Jaim admitted. "But it can't be really crazy, or the other animals wouldn't have listened to it. I mean, it took an awful lot of brains—or some sort of mental power—to turn everything against us."

"Everything? Even the birds?"

"I haven't seen a bird since I came home yesterday. Have you?"

Emmon tugged at his beard and peered out over the pastures sliding by beneath them. "H'mm. Come to think of it, I haven't even heard a cricket chirp lately. I don't like it."

Boy Jaim swallowed. "Don't you see? That's why I've just *got* to try to talk to it and find out what's wrong. If you vote to kill it, what's going to happen to all the other creatures? Will the birds come back? Will the animals ever be friendly again? I'll bet they won't!" It was an intolerable thought, and it made him a little ill.

They were approaching the first walled lanes of South Com now, and beyond the lush gardens that circled the houses they could glimpse the ripening fields

that filled the lower valley. So far they had sighted no goats, not even a stray. But as they swung around the base of a hill, Emmon suddenly gasped, and Boy Jaim saw a great mass of goats breaking from the cover of the woods high up on the right. They plunged down the slope in a solid tide upon the nearest field. The outer wall of the field had a recent break in it that had not yet been repaired. The goats were being driven straight for the weak point.

"The cunning beast!" Emmon exclaimed. "He herded those goats around out of sight, then turned them at just the right place. Nothing can stop them now. My warning didn't do any good."

Boy Jaim could hear startled shouts and see people running in the distance. But they were too late to stem the tide. The field was already being overrun, and some of the frightened goats were even crashing through the gates into the adjoining fields. In a short time all of South Com would be trampled as badly as West Com.

The Elder shook his head and swung the air sled around. "There isn't a thing that can be done to help them. We'd better go. I can't be late to the meeting."

"Wait!" Boy Jaim begged. "The bear must be close. I'll bet he's right up there on the hill somewhere, watching the whole thing. Let's see if we can locate him."

"There isn't time. We ought to be at the Council Hall now."

"But it'll hardly take a minute. I know that hill. There's a spot up there beside a big oak where you can see the whole valley. I'm sure he's there! No one's had even a glimpse of him yet, and this is our chance!"

Emmon frowned, then shrugged. "Oh, very well. Perhaps it would be wise. Seeing him might give us a better understanding of what we're up against."

Evening had come again, and the youngest herder climbed the slope to where the oldest herder stood waiting.

To his question, the oldest herder shook his head. "No, I haven't heard a word. Somehow I believe the beast has fooled the hunters. It's probably escaped."

"*You want it to escape!" the youngest herder accused, suddenly seeing a truth he had not realized before.*

"*Maybe I do, son. There are so few creatures like it left. Don't you think it has a right to live?*"

"*Of course not! It's a killer! It—*"

"*I know. But what made it that way? We've been on this planet some time, and we've done a lot of killing ourselves. Who gave us that right?*"

4

VERDICT

The Elder swung the covered sled around in a wide circle to the other side of the hill. Carefully, at treetop level, they approached the open area at the top. Finally, Boy Jaim pointed to an ancient tree growing amid a jumble of boulders. "That's the place," he whispered, trying to see into the sun-dappled shade beyond the rocks. "He ought to be there somewhere …"

"I can't make out anything," Emmon muttered. "We'll have to get closer."

Something warned Boy Jaim that they were close enough already. He tried to tell Emmon to turn aside, but his tongue seemed momentarily paralyzed.

He had entirely forgotten Doubtful, who had followed him aboard and had curled up to sleep in the back of the cabin. Now suddenly the small white dog leaped forward, bristling and barking. Doubtful's sharp bark, seldom used except in an emergency, jerked Boy Jaim out of his trance. On the instant his vision seemed to clear. Instead of the uncertain pattern of bright sunlight on rocks, he saw the incredible shape of the bear.

Its shadowed outline blended with the rocks, and it was so huge that his eyes had simply been unable to accept it at first. There was a long second when time seemed to stand still while he stared at it, an endless instant when he became aware of a hundred things about it that he would never forget. There was its size, so much greater than he'd dreamed. Then its color where the sun touched it—the exact gleaming gold of Tira's hair. There was the immediate feeling of coiled grace ready to explode into movement, which other bears didn't have. And most startling of all, there were its eyes—which were looking directly into his own. Black eyes, cold and knowing. Intelligent eyes …

Come closer, the eyes seemed to be urging him. *Closer* …

Doubtful's sharp bark came again, and in a flash Boy Jaim reached for the control lever, where old Emmon's hand seemed to be frozen. As the air sled bobbed upward, the coiled grace of the Golden One exploded into motion. Had the bear's leap come a fraction of a second sooner, the sled would have been smashed to bits. As it was, one mighty sweeping paw barely touched a corner of it, but it was enough to send the sled spinning like a leaf in a whirlwind.

When the shocked Elder was able to stop the spinning and gain control, Boy Jaim looked back wonderingly at the great bear. It had moved into the open and now stood calmly watching them as if nothing had happened.

"Why do you treat us this way?" he called to it. "We came in peace! What have you got against us?"

That the Golden One understood him, Boy Jaim was certain. But he might have been speaking to the rocks. The only response was a look of contempt that seemed to include all the race of man and his works.

"It's no use," Emmon muttered. "I've seen enough! The Council must be told of this." He brought the sled about and headed swiftly for Central. Nervously he mopped his face with a crumpled handkerchief, then added, "Heaven preserve us from such a monster! Did you notice its eyes?"

Boy Jaim moistened dry lips. "I sure did."

"Hypnotic!" the Elder squeaked. "Positively hypnotic! I knew something was wrong before I saw it, but I couldn't move my hand. If Doubtful hadn't barked—"

Doubtful admitted that he'd whiffed it in his sleep, and had nearly jumped out of his skin. Then he added plaintively, "I wish we could go somewhere and forget it."

Boy Jaim was beginning to wish the same thing. He put his arm around the dog and heard old Emmon say, "Mutant! That's what it is—an impossible mutant! And it's intelligent. That makes it a terrible danger. I don't know why we have to be afflicted with it at a time like this, when the very stars are threatening …"

"I—I suppose you'll have to vote to destroy it."

"Certainly! How else could I vote? Skies above, it must be done away with, and as quickly as possible. But without weapons I don't know how it can be done —unless we use poison. Ah, poison on arrows. Of course. It's a most horrible solution, but it has to be."

Boy Jaim closed his eyes and put his hands over his face.

Central, midway between the other communities, was the only area that might properly be called a town. Though few people lived there, it had theaters and club buildings where everyone met on occasion. Near these were storehouses to which everyone contributed, and other structures housing machinery and equipment where everyone took his turn to help produce what was needed. In the middle, surrounded by a park, was the circular Council Hall.

Usually, when the Council met, the Hall would be jammed with spectators. Today only a small audience ringed the circle of Councilmen in the center, for nearly everyone who was not recovering from a goat invasion was either fighting one or getting ready for one. The meeting had already started when Boy Jaim followed Emmon down the aisle. As was the custom, Andru, who had called the session, was acting as spokesman.

Boy Jaim saw L'Mara sitting alone behind her mother and her grandmother. Beyond her were a group of the older students from Emmon's class. They had watched Boy Jaim come in with the Elder, and now they all looked at him expectantly as he sat down near L'Mara. She barely glanced at him, but instantly her silent questions began beating into his mind.

"*Are the goats in South Com? What's happened? Did you see the bear?*"

"*The goats are wrecking South Com,*" he told her. "*And I saw the bear.*" He visualized his meeting with it, and heard her gasp as she saw it through his mind.

Down in the circle of Councilmen and Elders, Andru deferred to Emmon, who described the bear and told of his experience with it. There were exclamations of astonishment and sudden questions. Then Andru took the floor again and said, "We've no time to waste. I realize many of you will find it difficult to vote for the death of a fellow creature—but this beast is obviously a mutant, and he's

extremely dangerous. Not only is he about to destroy all our crops, but he may bring death to many of us unless we act immediately."

There was a sudden hush when Andru finally asked for the vote. The moment was historic. Man had long ago ceased the taking of life. Life was sacred, and to destroy it for any reason—people felt—would be an act of barbarism.

Some of the more sensitive Councilmen, stricken by conscience, refused to vote. But one by one, the majority of them rose and gave their consent to Andru's plea, and the Elders approved. The Golden One must die.

Boy Jaim had expected this all along. But now in the silence following the death sentence he felt a sudden tightening all through him. He heard Andru say tersely, "Now we must decide how the beast can be destroyed. Has anyone a suggestion?"

Before Emmon could rise and say anything, Boy Jaim had crept from his seat. He gained the aisle and sped in mounting horror for the exit. Outside he began to run. He did not have a sled to flee in, but it hardly mattered so long as he put distance between himself and the Council floor. Doubtful followed, unnoticed.

Behind him a startled L'Mara called silently, "*What's wrong? Why are you leaving?*"

"*Listen to Emmon,*" he flung back. "*You'll know in a minute.*"

He crossed the park and began trotting down the first path he saw that led out of Central. Bitterly he wondered why he had ever taken up the sport of archery. Then he realized it was because he'd never been smart in most of his studies, like the other kids. But he could beat them all with a bow. It was one of the few things that, like talking to animals or finding his way in the forest, he could do better than anyone in the Five Communities.

He expected L'Mara to call him again before he'd gone very far, and she did.

"*Boy Jaim! Did you know they were going to use poisoned arrows on the bear?*"

"*That's a silly question! Why do you think I left?*"

"*You needn't be nasty!*"

"*I can't help it. How would you feel if you were in my place?*"

"*Oh, Boy Jaim, I'm sorry! It's awful about the bear, but it's something that has to be done right away. No one else can shoot the way you can—*"

"*I'm not going to shoot the Golden One. There are dozens of others who can do it—he's too big to miss.*"

"*But Boy Jaim, it would be dangerous for anyone else to try. They'd have to get too close. Don't you see? And anyhow, they'd have to find him first—and that would be even more dangerous for most people, 'cause they wouldn't know how.*" She paused. "*Are you listening to me?*"

"*Of course I'm listening! How can I help it? You're like a bee right in my head.*" He could have shut her out, but it required an effort. Anyway, he didn't really want to shut her out. He asked, "*Did Andru tell you to call me to meet him at home?*"

"*Yes. He's going to make some special points for your arrows, and Councilman Traml is going to mix up something at his laboratory to smear on them. I think Andru wants to pilot the sled for you.*"

"*Nothing doing. I wouldn't want anybody with me, and you can tell Andru I'm not going home.*"

"*But—but where are you going?*"

"*I don't know. Leave me alone.*"

"*Aw, please, Boy Jaim. I know how you feel, but you don't have to take it out on me.*"

"*I'm sorry. But can't you see I've got to be alone so I can think?*"

"*A'right. If—if you want me for anything, just call.*"

He was almost sorry when she left him, for now suddenly he was faced with his aloneness in a world where no birds sang, and not even the chatter of a squirrel broke the stillness. The very sunlight seemed cold. He reached the edge of town in a moment and stood undecided, hardly knowing which way to turn. Far behind him a troubled Doubtful stopped and waited patiently, not wanting to intrude.

If Emmon's place hadn't been so far away, he might have headed there, but it would have taken hours to reach it on foot. The sound of running water lured him into the parklike woods on his right, and presently he found himself following a path that wound upward above a rocky creek. Although the area seemed familiar, he was not consciously aware of being drawn to a particular destination until he reached it.

It was a well-remembered gate in a wall. A lump rose in his throat as he unlatched the gate and went through. Years ago, when Doubtful was a pup, this place had been home.

As the gate clicked shut behind him he glimpsed what might have been a chipmunk darting for cover down by the side of the house, and he wondered if it could be old Scatterbrain or one of his family. Probably not, but it made him feel better to see life about.

He moved on up to the terrace, and suddenly paused, smiling. A huge toad sat there at the edge of the sunlight, waiting for flies. "Hi, Warts," he said, and stooped and touched the toad, whom he'd known for years.

Warts was too limited to do more than blink at him by way of recognition, but it was a welcoming blink and it wiped away some of Boy Jaim's feeling of lostness.

Someone, he realized, had been here and swept the terrace and aired out the house recently, for the front windows under the terrace shelter were open, and there was no litter on the flagstones. He unlatched the front door and entered. The house had been dusted and the big front room looked as inviting as if his parents still lived here. Who could have cleaned the place? L'Mara? But of course. No one else would have bothered. Someday, it was understood, this would be L'Mara's home as well as his own.

A small, muffled sound drew him through the house and down a flight of stone stairs to the lower level which, as in all the older homes, had been cut deep into the hillside. Before he reached the dimness below, wall lights came on automatically and sent a glow through the cavelike openings ahead. It surprised him to find that the solar electric system, built into the roof, still worked.

A little flash of movement jerked him to the left. Abruptly he cried, "Scatterbrain—hey! Don't run off! Don't you know me?"

The chipmunk stopped, and one bright eye peered at him curiously and suspiciously from the safety of a corner. He spoke again. Now Scatterbrain slowly approached and suddenly threw himself upon him, chittering and making a great fuss of recognition.

Something fell from a stuffed cheek pouch to the floor. Boy Jaim picked it up. It was a bean. A trail of beans, he saw, led across the floor to a storeroom where dried foods had always been kept. Scatterbrain, he soon discovered, had broken several jars of beans by pushing them from a shelf and had been busy hiding the contents in the ground outside.

"But why?" Boy Jaim asked. "Don't you know it's too early to be burying things? Especially beans!"

"No, no, no!" Scatterbrain chitter-chattered. "Need food!"

"But there's plenty of food everywhere! Why, the nut trees are loaded—or haven't you noticed? Besides, you're wasting your time, burying the beans now. It's midsummer. They'll all sprout."

"No, no, no! Need food. Must hurry."

Scatterbrain rushed away and vanished through some secret hole that let him out to the rocky hillside. In seconds he returned with empty cheek pouches. Boy Jaim watched him thoughtfully as he gathered more beans and flashed away again. Scatterbrain might be flighty and excitable and have a little difficulty communicating, but he wasn't stupid. Not a bit. He knew exactly what he was doing, though it didn't seem to make sense. What was driving him?

As the chipmunk came back the second time, Boy Jaim asked, "Have you heard about the Golden One?"

Scatterbrain paused and chittered questions.

After several exchanges, Boy Jaim gathered that Scatterbrain was aware of something very unpleasant in the air, but hadn't learned what it was. Did it have anything to do with hiding winter food so early? Scatterbrain didn't know. All he knew was that the future looked *very* bad, and that everyone must gather food.

Frowning, Boy Jaim turned to a cubbyhole on the right and sat down in a chair facing a desk. What was going to happen? Even old Emmon had said that there was trouble in the stars. According to Malla, it had already started.

The desk, of age-darkened wood, had been beautifully carved and built into the wall by some early relative. Automatically he opened it and looked curiously at the large cloth-bound volume lying before him. It was his father's journal.

The sight of it now, on this day of growing uncertainty, somehow gave him comfort. It was almost as if his father stood close and could talk to him. He thumbed slowly through the journal, pausing occasionally to glance over a page. Most of the entries had to do with weather and the crops, and local happenings. But his father had been interested in a thousand things. A question at the top of a page suddenly caught his eye. In strong script his father had written:

> What actually happened at the Barrens? Was ancient man's last huge city destroyed by a meteor, as we have been taught? Or was that teaching a lie?
>
> We in the Five Communities think highly of ourselves, as if man could do no wrong. But secretly I think otherwise. I suspect we are the remnants of a murderous race, and that man himself was mainly responsible for what happened at the Barrens.
>
> I hope I am wrong. Emmon insists that Nature alone caused the destruction and points out that the entire surface of the globe was entirely changed at about the same time. I do not like to think that man might have disturbed a balance that triggered the entire change—but I

cannot help wondering.

The fact remains that there were only a few survivors: a small group of humans who were our ancestors, and a limited number of birds and animals. Why did these few survive when all the rest died? Were they tougher than the others, and immune to something that killed the majority? Or were they mutants? If they were mutants, then all of us today, man and beast, belong to new breeds—though whether or not we are any better still remains to be seen.

Boy Jaim, shocked by what he had read, had momentarily forgotten the Golden One. Could man himself have caused the destruction at the Barrens? He couldn't believe it. Even early man must have been too intelligent to kill his own kind. But there might be something to the mutant idea. He flipped the page and read:

Here is another puzzle: Why do we build the lower levels of our houses the way we do? They are cut deep into the hillsides and are more like caves. It's just an old custom, we say, and very practical for storage. But I suspect our ancestors first built them as hiding places. Only, what were they hiding from? Radiation, or poison air from volcanoes or meteors? Extreme cold or heat? Vicious animals? I understand there were once some monstrous bears that were highly dangerous to humans, but there are no records that our ancestors had actual conflict with them.

Boy Jaim paused with a quick intake of breath. Bears—monstrous bears! Were they like the Golden One? His eye raced on:

So many centuries have passed that any written records would have crumbled to nothing. What really happened at the Barrens and in the long period afterward when our ancestors must have struggled to live are puzzles we may never solve. Unless, as Emmon says, we learn to make better use of the Pool of Knowledge. Occasionally we've been able to dip into it a bit. The ability is a rare one, but Jenna and I are beginning to hope our son may possess it. Boy Jaim is too young to show it at this writing, yet already he has developed a remarkable ability to converse with animals.

Most animals, I have noticed, are telepathic. Not only can they communicate to some extent with each other, but they also know in advance when trouble threatens. If Boy Jaim can somehow manage …

There was more about himself, but Boy Jaim did not read it. The words suddenly blurred as a startling thought came to him. Abruptly a switch seemed to click in the back of his mind.

He visioned Scatterbrain hurrying to store away food—and the Golden One driving the goats to destroy it. Something—something unknown and nameless—was going to happen, and the little chipmunk knew it. The great bear knew it also. Food meant survival, and the lack of food could mean death. Even Emmon had been afraid that there might be a terrible shortage of food. He had advised that no seed be wasted.

The Golden One was cleverly trying to bring about the destruction of all the future food supplies. Did that mean he knew what was going to happen?

Of course the beast knew!

Boy Jaim stared blankly in front of him while his clenched hands beat slowly on the chair arms. A great dread began to grow in him. Suddenly he lurched to his feet. A startled Scatterbrain chittered questioningly as he sped past and rushed up the steps, but he did not notice.

In the upper hall he paused briefly, thinking of transportation. Should he call L'Mara?

Instantly he decided against it. She'd want to go with him, and there was bound to be danger. But there ought to be a usable air sled around here somewhere.

He turned, ran to the end of the hall, jerked the rear door open, and raced into the courtyard.

The youngest herder thought of his dog and stared unhappily into the night while he waited for his star to rise. When the star appeared, serene and beautiful, he caught his breath and forgot the anger and the hurt and the confusion in him. The hunters were still out, and the beast that had caused so much trouble was still eluding them. But at the moment it did not seem to matter.

In his mind he could see again the planet he'd imagined. For a moment he saw it as a peaceful place, then he realized that man, if he lived there, might have his troubles. After all, if there were beasts around with the power to hurt man …

He shook his head, and suddenly wondered why man and beast were always at odds. Did man really have the right to kill?

5

PLEA

On the right of the courtyard Boy Jaim threw back the wide doors of a storage structure and ran inside. Long ago he'd helped take the better sleds over to Andru's house, but here, in a corner, were a pair of old ones that had been left behind. They were rough, open affairs for use in the fields, though one of them, he remembered, had a power unit strong enough to carry him anywhere.

It did not occur to him, until he had hurried over to it and was reaching for the switch, that the sled might have lain too long away from the sunlight. The switch, turned on, brought no response. The solar batteries were dead.

In dismay he tried the second sled. It was as useless as the first. Hurriedly he hauled the heavier sled out into the courtyard where the afternoon sun could reach it and wondered if he had time enough to wait for the power to build up. Or had he better call L'Mara?

She chose that moment to call him.

"*Boy Jaim, please—this is important! Where can I find you?*"

"*What do you want?*"

"*Emmon wants to see you right away, and so does Andru.*"

He knew he'd better avoid Andru as long as possible, but the Elder was another matter. Suddenly he wished Emmon had the ability to communicate with him as easily as L'Mara. But few people could, and with most of them it required great effort and concentration.

"*Do you know what Emmon wants?*" he asked.

"*He didn't say—but I can guess. I'm at home now, and he's just left for his place to study some star charts. He's awfully worried …*"

The Elder, he thought, had a right to be worried.

"*I—I'd better see Emmon,*" he told her. "*I'm at the old house, out back, and I don't have a sled. Will you come and get me? And hurry!*"

While he waited for her he walked in circles, trying not to think of what might happen if he failed in what lay ahead. He could feel excitement and fear in every direction and hear the constant rush and whistle of speeding air sleds in the distance. Never in his memory had the Five Communities been so upset.

A sudden quick scuffling from the rear of the courtyard caught his attention, and he turned to see Doubtful squeezing his small body under the back gate.

Boy Jaim said, "Why didn't you bark? I'd have let you in."

"Didn't want to bother you," Doubtful told him. "You got things figured out now?"

"Hardly. All I know is what I've got to do."

"That's what I mean. You taking me?"

"No. It wouldn't be safe."

The dog looked at him reproachfully. “Be safer with me.”

“Maybe it would. So you know where I’m going, do you?”

“Sure. Always know.”

L’Mara arrived then, coming so swiftly that she was forced to bank and circle before she could manage a sideslip and spin into the courtyard. It took unusual skill and quickness, for the sled she was using hadn’t been built for that sort of flying. Just watching it gave Boy Jaim a chill.

“Are you crazy?” he snapped at her. “When I told you to hurry I didn’t mean for you to pull any silly tricks—”

“I know what I’m doing!” she flared back. She shook her bronze hair from her face and glared at him with her big eyes full of fire. For a moment she looked like an angry little red squirrel. Then she wilted and became very small and young and frightened.

“I—I’m sorry, Boy Jaim. It seems like everybody’s gone crazy, and it’s got me all upset. Why did that horrible beast have to come here and ruin everything?”

“I can’t understand it,” he muttered, as he leaped aboard after Doubtful. “But maybe it’s a good thing he came. Let’s get on to Emmon’s.”

She sent the sled upward and turned it toward the Elder’s distant hill. “W-what did you mean by saying it’s a good thing? I don’t see anything good about it. It’s awful!”

He drew a deep breath. “Look, L’Mara, something’s going to happen, and that bear knows it. If he hadn’t come, we might have been caught by it. But now, maybe I can find out in time so we’ll know what to do. Don’t you see?”

She nodded quickly. “Emmon thinks—well, wait till you talk to him. Father’s furious with you for running off. He’d hurried to cut out some special tips for you, but when you wouldn’t come home he called over Hiras and the other members of your archery team. Before they could get their arrows ready, the North Com team flew down, and then Councilman Traml came with a chemical he’d mixed—”

“Hey,” he interrupted. “What’s going on?”

“I—I told you everyone’s gone crazy. It’s the bear—being allowed to kill it, I mean.”

“But—” A new kind of horror was rising in him. “Are—are you trying to tell me they all *want* to kill it?”

“Yes. Everybody wants to—even Father! The North Com team has challenged the West Com team to see who can locate it and put the first arrow in it. The East Com team wants to take part. They’re supposed to be getting ready to fight off goats, but they’re coming anyway—and the South Com team as well.”

“But didn’t Emmon tell them what the bear is like? Don’t they realize what will happen if they get too close to it?”

“Of course Emmon told them! Do you think that made any difference? They don’t really believe him. They want to kill that bear. A lot of them are being stiff-backed and noble about it, as if they were everyone’s saviors—and some are even saying you ran off because you were afraid—but the truth is they’re all secretly excited about going hunting and killing something.” She paused and gave him a quick, worried look. “W-what are you going to do, Boy Jaim?”

He struck his clenched hands together. “I’ve got to stop them, if I can. But first I must see Emmon.”

The Elder was waiting for them on his terrace. It was late in the afternoon now, and Emmon was showing the strain he had been under by a growing irritability. His eyes were glittering and he was impatiently twisting a ruler in his frail hands.

"Well!" he snapped at Boy Jaim. "You knew you were needed! What do you mean by running off at a time like this?"

"I—I'm sorry, sir, but I just had to go somewhere and think."

"Think!" Emmon shrilled. "Thunder above! You haven't learned how to think yet—you're being driven by your emotions. Think indeed! Now forget that impossible beast for a moment and listen to what I have to say."

"Yes, sir."

"I've had another look at my charts, and there's no question about our being in for trouble. It's a far more serious matter than that devilish bear."

"I—I know that, sir."

"Eh?" Emmon's voice was hardly more than a squeak. "What do you know that I don't know?"

"It's something about food," Boy Jaim hastened to say. "The small creatures are hiding it as fast as they can. They know something's going to happen. The bear knows it too—that's why he's trying to destroy our food, so we'll die. I wish you'd get on the radiophone and tell everybody in East Com and North Com to get out in the fields and pick everything that can be eaten, even though it's not ripe. They'd better start right away and work all night—"

"But what of the goats?" Emmon cried. "You know that beast will drive them there tonight if he isn't killed."

"Not tonight. Pshaw, a goat's a goat. When he's tired he won't go a stop farther than he wants to go, even if the Golden One kills him. And before someone kills the Golden One I've got to try to talk to him—"

"Talk to him!" the Elder shrilled. "Don't be a fool. You've tried talking to him once—now forget him and listen to me."

"Yes, sir?"

"It's this: Years ago, both your parents and I knew you were developing abilities uncommon to the majority. Because of them, we believed a certain extra ability would show up later." Emmon prodded him impatiently with the ruler, and squeaked, "Do you know what I'm talking about, young man?"

"Y-yes, sir." There flashed through Boy Jaim's mind the words his father had written in the journal about the Pool of Knowledge. "But I haven't got it. Why don't you ask Malla? Maybe, if she tried—"

"Bah!" Emmon exploded. "I don't want hazy prophecy—I want facts. Understand? Facts—how, what, when, how long—facts we can use. Of course Malla's right about the Time of Trouble being on us. How does that help us? Skies above, science tells me trouble is due—but it doesn't give enough facts so we'll know which way to jump."

"Jump?"

"That's what I said! We're coming under cosmic and planetary attractions that can kill us all—with burning heat, flooding rain, or freezing cold. The pressures could cause earthquakes, or start volcanoes spouting from the sea again. Where are we going to live? In our stone houses during earthquakes? Ha! But suppose it's freezing outside, or the air's so full of volcanic dust you can't breathe it?

Understand?" In his concern and impatience the Elder had been twisting the ruler in his frail hands. Now suddenly it broke. He hurled the pieces away and added, "This is a life-and-death matter. We need facts to stay alive. Even one fact could be enough. If we just knew *what* was going to happen—"

"The bear knows," said Boy Jaim.

"Eh?" Old Emmon's glittering eyes twitched at the corners, slowly closed, then opened again. "The *bear* knows? How do you know that he knows?"

"I just know it," Boy Jaim said simply. "That's why I've got to find him and try to talk to him again. If—if he won't talk, maybe I can learn something anyway—I mean, just from his thoughts." He turned toward the sled, then paused and added, "It's the only chance we have, so I'd better hurry and see Andru and try to stop those archery teams for a while. If you'll call the people and tell them to get out in the fields …"

The Elder blinked at him a moment, seemingly undecided. Suddenly he burst out, "Don't waste time on Andru—I'll take care of him and those silly archers! Go find that devilish beast!" He looked quickly at L'Mara. "Are you going to pilot the sled?"

"Yes, sir."

"No!" Boy Jaim cried. "I'm not having her along—this is something I'd better do alone."

Emmon held up his hands. "You may get killed alone. From my experience with the creature, two are far better than one. L'Mara's a good pilot, and she's quick. Let her help you. But don't either of you forget for a second what that beast can do! Now go!"

Boy Jaim did not bother to give directions to L'Mara, nor did she ask for any—she stubbornly persisted in being angry with him for not wanting her along. It went without saying that she knew he'd been thinking of her safety, but this made no difference. She refused even to look at him, and her small mouth remained tight and set. Her hand, though, seemed to be directed by an unfailing instinct, for it sent the sled exactly where he wanted it to go.

They were hardly away from Emmon's hill when it occurred to him to swing near Andru's place on the chance that some of the archers had left before they could be stopped. Instantly, as if his mind had been connected to L'Mara's, the sled changed course. Andru's house was still some distance away when he sighted a group of sleds that had just risen above it and were beginning to race for South Com. In a flash, almost before the thought had formed in his mind, they were speeding to overtake the group.

He recognized two of the sleds immediately. The first belonged to Hiras, of his own archery team. Flying just beyond young Hiras was the leader of the North Com team, a powerfully built man named Bors, ten years his senior.

As they overtook Hiras, Boy Jaim called out that there had been a change of plans, and that the great bear was not to be hunted until he'd had another chance to talk to it. Hurriedly he tried to explain to Hiras the reason for it, but the other refused to listen.

"Whose crazy idea is this?" Hiras cried. "You can't make our team stop now!"

"You've got to! Emmon will explain—"

"I'm not stopping unless Bors does! Do you want his team to beat us?"

“Don’t argue about it—we’re not playing games today!”

They flew on and caught up with Bors. The big man ignored his plea. “Don’t tell me what to do,” Bors flung back grimly. “The Council said the bear must die, and I intend to kill it. And a few goats as well. It’s time we taught all those fool animals a lesson!”

The remaining sleds belonged to Bor’s team, and there was no use wasting time with them. Boy Jaim fought down his sudden fury at Bors and sat in tight-lipped silence while L’Mara slowed and let the others go ahead. The chance to kill seemed to have affected everyone alike. They were beyond all reason.

L’Mara forgot her anger and glanced at him miserably. “You see?” she whispered.

“Yes. Bloodthirsty idiots!”

“Oh, I think they just want to be heroes. By killing something big …”

“Maybe. If they don’t get killed trying—but they probably won’t be able to find it.” He peered quickly around, then said, “Get down behind that hill, then turn east and head for the river. Fly low and don’t let them see where we’re going.”

L’Mara dipped low, skirted the woods fringing East Com, and flew a winding course between the hills until they reached the river. It was the same stream he had crossed yesterday on his return from the Barrens, but here, after circling the upper part of the Five Communities, it became a broad shallow stretch of rapids that curved southward through a field of boulders. The hundreds of clear pools made it a favorite fishing area for bears.

They paused and hovered just under the canopy of a clump of great trees shading the bank. The spot gave them a good view of the river and the ground nearby, yet they were hidden from anyone flying overhead. Usually a dozen or more bears could be seen fishing along this part of the stream. Today there were none. Somewhere an unseen crow cawed derisively. In a land where birds had stopped singing, the sound was almost evil.

L’Mara shivered. She whispered, “Do you think the beast will come this way?”

He nodded. “He’s got to eat, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t know. If he’s a mutant, maybe …”

“He’d still be a bear, and bears eat fish. This is the best fishing area for miles. But even if he didn’t touch fish, he’d have to come near here to drive the goats to either East Com or Central.”

“I thought you told Emmon that the goats wouldn’t let themselves be driven any farther tonight.”

He shrugged. “They’ll need grass and water, so they’ll almost have to come this far before they stop. I’m just guessing. Somehow, though, I keep feeling the Golden One will come through here, goats or no goats. He must be going to try something different …”

“What would it be?”

He shrugged again. “I’m trying to figure it out. Just pray one of those archers doesn’t sight him first.”

They became silent and for a long while sat listening and watching. Several times Boy Jaim sent his thoughts out, hesitantly searching, careful for fear the bear would sense him first. It would never do to forget the Golden One’s intelligence, or the power that could sway all creatures near him.

Over the hills beyond the river the sky was graying and turning ugly with

coming rain. Out of the corner of his eye Boy Jaim watched it apprehensively. The shadows around them were deepening. Dark would come quickly when the weather overtook them. The last thing he wanted was to be caught here in the blackness, with wind and rain whipping about them.

His uneasiness grew as the rain came nearer, and the lowering sun crept closer to the ridge on his right. The sun finally touched the ridge. At the same moment he became aware that a shadow had moved on the ground below. A great shadow.

A numbness seized him, and something in his mind seemed to say: *Closer … Come lower, closer …*

Doubtful's sudden, frantic barking brought him out of his trance. Instantly, before his mind had quite formed the order to move the sled to safety, L'Mara's hand had carried it out. They shot away from the trees and rose well above them.

Below, through a break in the foliage, he saw the monstrous golden shape outlined as if in shimmering fire by the sun's last rays, and he heard L'Mara gasp as she caught her first sight of it.

He clutched the frame of the open cabin, speechless for a moment as he stared at the great flat head with the cold obsidian eyes. Suddenly he blurted, "We—we've never done anything to you! So why are you treating us this way? Why are you trying to hurt everyone? Tell me—Why?"

The great head tilted slightly as the cold eyes studied him. For long seconds it seemed that the beast would disdainfully refuse to answer. It came as a shock when the bear did speak. It was more thought than sound, and in it was a deadliness that struck him with stunning force.

"You are called Boy Jaim?"

"Y-yes. How did you know?"

"I know. I am the last of my kind, and I am burdened with more than I want to know. So little of it is good. You belong to a hateful race, Boy Jaim. That is reason enough for seeing the end of you."

Shaken, Boy Jaim could only stare down at the creature, his mouth working without sound. The sun was gone now, and the bear was beginning to fade into the shadows. Suddenly he found his voice and begged, "Don't go—please! I—I've got to talk to you."

"There's nothing more to say, Boy Jaim."

"But—but there is! I—I've been looking for you. I came in friendship—"

"Your friendship means nothing to me."

"It should. They wanted me to kill you—but I told them I wouldn't. And I won't. I came here without weapons. But others are hunting you, and if they find you, you'll die."

"I know."

"Then why don't you go and leave us alone? You started all this. You turned everything against us, and you even killed goats—"

"Your archers are killing goats now, and for far less reason than I."

"No!"

"They are, Boy Jaim. Does that explain anything to you?"

"If they're killing goats," he cried, "it's because you drove them to it! You've upset everything! Your hating us doesn't make sense—you've got the wrong idea

about us—”

“You have the wrong idea about yourself, Boy Jaim. Are you so stupid that you would expect the serpent’s brood to be other than serpents?”

“Huh?” He stared downward. “I don’t understand. W-what are you talking about?”

There was no answer. A wind had sprung up, whipping the leaves below him. In the gathering gloom he could no longer make out the creature.

In sudden fear he cried, “Wait—please! What’s going to happen? Tell me—*What’s going to happen?*”

A cold blast of wind and rain drowned his voice and sent the sled flying over the treetops.

While L’Mara struggled to keep the sled under control, he managed to draw the fabric top over the cabin and make it secure against the rain. Then he sank into his seat, feeling sick and defeated.

Not once had he been able to penetrate the curtain that hid the Golden One’s thoughts. All he’d learned was the terrible force behind that curtain.

What was going to happen?

The youngest herder unrolled a cape and drew it around him, for the night had clouded over and he could hear the rush of wind in the distance. His star was no longer visible, but the imagined planet was strong in his mind, and again it filled him with wondering.

He tried to tell himself that vicious creatures had no rights whatever, and that it was man's right to do as he chose about them, just because he was man. After all, wasn't that the way it had always been?

But the idea suddenly troubled him. There was something wrong about it. What if beasts everywhere really did have rights? …

And was it possible that man wasn't all that he pictured himself to be? …

6

RAIN

It was black dark and raining furiously before they had been traveling ten minutes. Boy Jaim had expected an early dark, but nothing as swift and intense as the blackness that suddenly clamped down upon them. He turned on the searchlight for L'Mara, but it was practically useless. They could not see the threshing tree-tops below them nor the steep hills on all sides into which they could easily crash.

L'Mara would never have admitted her fright, and she was too stubborn to ask for help. But it made no difference—he was instantly aware of her fear, and of the fact that she was lost. A strong sense of direction told him where they were, but to make doubly sure he jerked back one of the window panels and peered out. Only an occasional vague blur of light could be seen. The blurs, though, were enough to satisfy him. Silently he began directing L'Mara's hand. A half hour later she managed to bring the sled down safely in Andru's courtyard.

For a while afterward L'Mara sat trembling, unable to speak. Boy Jaim put a comforting arm around her, saying, "You did all right, little squirrel. I'm glad I wasn't alone, or I'd be hung up in a tree somewhere."

"Aw …"

He couldn't see her face in the darkness, but he felt the sudden glow of happiness in her. It was followed by alarm as the rain increased and began beating thunderously about them. He had never heard such rain. Worriedly he searched for a tarpaulin under the seat, found it, and pulled it over them as they got out and ran for the porch.

When he opened the door he could smell the aroma of warm food from the kitchen. Hunger rose in him, sharp and biting, for he had not eaten since morning. In the next instant he forgot his hunger, for the house was full of people. Worried and frightened people.

Beyond the rather grim-looking members of the archery teams who had been caught here by the rain, he glimpsed Andru in the alcove, busy at the radiophone. Bors stood scowling beside him. He was suddenly relieved to see old Emmon huddled in a blanket by the fireplace, where Hiras and another youth were trying to coax fire from a smoldering heap of damp wood. He'd wanted badly to talk to the Elder again, but hadn't counted on finding him here.

With L'Mara and Doubtful trailing him, he started over to report to Emmon, but at that moment Andru glanced up and saw them and leaped to his feet, and Tira rushed into the room and threw her arms around L'Mara. "Thank heaven!" she said fervently. "We've been calling all over—another sled has been lost, and no one knows—"

"We were not lost," L'Mara hastened to say. "Boy Jaim knew his way through

the dark."

Andru, hastening to them, said sternly, "Young man, it's one thing to risk your own life, but you've no business risking L'Mara's. Why didn't you start back sooner?"

"It couldn't be helped, sir." He tried to explain to his uncle that the dark was unnatural and had come too early, but Andru refused to listen.

"I've had enough of your stupidity and rebelliousness," Andru snapped. "You ran off after the Council met, and you refused—"

"Hold it, Andru," old Emmon interrupted, his voice thin and scratchy with strain. "Everybody's had it today, and we're all on edge. But right now it's of vital importance to find out about the bear. Did you see the beast again, Boy Jaim?"

The room was suddenly quiet, and now the thundering hammer of the rain outside seemed doubly loud. It was a frightening sound. Boy Jaim winced at the beat of it, and nodded. "We saw him, sir."

"You *saw* him?" Emmon squeaked, hurrying up to him and clutching his arm. "You. really saw him—and you managed to speak to him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what did he say? Out with it!" The Elder shook him, almost in a frenzy. "What did the devilish creature have to say?"

Boy Jaim wet his lips. "He—he said we belong to a hateful race, and that was reason enough for seeing the end of us."

"What else? Speak up, boy!"

Boy Jaim hesitated. "Er—what is a serpent, sir? Is it an extinct creature, or is it just a word we use when we don't like someone?"

"Serpent?" Emmon shrilled impatiently. "What have serpents to do with it? Tell me what the beast said!"

"When—when I told him he had the wrong idea about us, he said we had the wrong idea about ourselves. Then he asked, were we so stupid that we would expect the serpent's brood to be other than serpents."

Emmon stared at him. "*Serpents,* he called us!" Suddenly he shrilled, "But what's going to happen? Didn't you ask? Couldn't you find out?"

Boy Jaim swallowed. "I asked, but he refused to tell me. I—I couldn't find out a thing."

Malla, mother of Tira, came over and said, "I know what's going to happen. It's happening right now. It's going to rain, and rain, and rain—"

"Mother, *please,*" Tira begged.

"Just listen to it!" Malla persisted. "Do you realize what it's doing to the fields in North Com and East Com? It's flooding them."

"*Flooding* them?" Andru repeated.

"Of course it's flooding them! Those areas always flood in a bad storm. It's happened several times in my memory. This year all the root crops are planted in those two areas. I *told* them not to do it—"

"Heaven preserve us!" Emmon whispered. "No one can harvest a thing over in those fields now, and every last bit of the crop will rot in the ground. I wonder if that devilish bear knew it would rain like this?"

"I'm sure he did," Boy Jaim told him. "That's why he drove the goats around to South Com instead of North Com."

For a moment everyone was silent, listening fearfully to the rain. The stout old house shook with the sound of it. They might have been plunged under a monstrous cataract. How, Boy Jaim wondered, could the skies hold so much water to hurl upon them?

Then he became acutely aware that Bors was scowling at him.

"Where did you see the bear?" Bors demanded.

"Over by the river, south of East Com."

"And you saw it too, L'Mara?"

L'Mara shivered. "Yes. I—I could hardly believe it. The thing was *huge.*"

Bors said, "Did you hear it talk to Boy Jaim?"

She looked up curiously at the big man. "You know I can't talk to animals the way Boy Jaim can. Nor can any of us do it. I can understand Doubtful, but—"

"But you couldn't understand anything that may've been said between Boy Jaim and the bear?"

L'Mara's small mouth grew tight. "What are you trying to do, Bors?"

Bors growled, "Just wanted to find out the truth about this animal lover." He snorted. "He's got a great imagination, so maybe he's been fooling himself as well as the rest of you. But he can't talk to animals any better than I can."

"He can too!" L'Mara cried, and Boy Jaim said, "Bors, I think you've gone far enough."

"I haven't started," Bors replied grimly. "Instead of acting the idiot, pretending you can do something you can't, you should have killed that beast while you had the chance."

"I agree," Andru snapped.

"I didn't have my bow," Boy Jaim told him. "Anyhow, I wouldn't have used it. I'm not going to kill—"

"Crazy fool animal lover!" Bors roared. "You'd actually let that beast stay alive and endanger everyone!"

"The bear's not the real danger!" Boy Jaim cried, "It's something else, and the rain's only part of it—"

"Shut up!" Andru ordered. "I've had all the nonsense I can take out of you for one day."

Emmon held up a hand in protest, managed to squeak out something about testing the poison, then his voice failed him entirely.

"Was that the excuse for killing goats?" Boy Jaim said furiously. "That they were testing the poison? Who did it?" His voice rose. "Who killed the goats?"

"I killed plenty of them!" Bors roared. "And I'd have killed more if there'd been time. What of it?"

"What of it? Why—why, you're worse than the bear! You're a barbarian! That's what you are—a dirty, bloodthirsty barbarian!"

Andru seized him by the shoulder and jerked him about. "I'll not have that kind of talk in my house. Apologize to Bors!"

Boy Jaim tore away. "I won't do it. I meant what I said." He stared around him and suddenly realized that Bors was not the only one who had killed today. Hiras had done it, and so had several others. He could see it in their eyes, and now it came to him with a shock that it had been done with Andru's approval and urging.

"Barbarians!" he cried, looking from one to the other. "We've gone for

centuries and called ourselves civilized. Now all at once you start killing!"

"A goat's only a goat," Hiras snapped back. "What's the difference? We should have got rid of a lot of them long ago."

Andru said grimly, "Are you going to apologize?"

"Never!"

Andru's lips thinned. "You've turned against your own kind in favor of beasts —and now you've insulted people under this roof. If you refuse to apologize, you cannot remain here."

"Then I'll leave."

In the sudden silence as he whirled for the door, Boy Jaim was conscious of the thundering of the rain, and he could feel the anguish in L'Mara as she stood with her small fists pressed tight against her face, her eyes huge upon him. Then, at the door, he heard Tira gasp and call out to him.

"Wait!" Tira cried. "It's madness to leave on a night like this! Andru, you can't do this to him. You just can't!"

"He can apologize," Andru said harshly.

Boy Jaim paused briefly at the door and glanced back at Andru. In a voice that did not sound like his own he managed to say, "You know how I feel about what's been done. I'll *never* apologize. *Never.*"

In the next instant he had wrenched open the door and was rushing out into the rain.

He was too upset to think of the tarpaulin he and L'Mara had used earlier, and the roaring cataract that struck him drenched him in an instant. He made it to the sled and scrambled inside. Only now, as he sank shivering upon the seat, did he discover that Doubtful had come with him.

He drew the trembling dog close to him for warmth, then turned on the searchlight and tried to see through the rain. He found it difficult to distinguish anything more than two or three feet ahead. Had there been much wind it would have been impossible to use the sled. But by now the very weight of water coming down seemed to have stopped all movement of the air, and he was able to rise slowly and then cautiously feel his way out of the courtyard.

When he was above the lane that wound in the direction of Central, he came down close to the ground, adjusted the searchlight, and began following the dim footpath between the walls. Earlier he would have gone above the trees and trusted to the compass in his mind to take him straight to his destination. But in this incredible downpour he could not bring himself to lose contact with the earth. There were occasional houses on either side, though he had to guess when he passed one. The rain completely drowned the glow of every light.

A short distance from Andru's house the path he was following turned into a torrent. Later, on lower ground, the torrent became a series of spreading lakes. When he passed the final stone wall on the outskirts of West Com, there was nothing left to guide him and he was forced to depend entirely on instinct.

Every few minutes L'Mara would call and ask fearfully if he was all right. At last he told her, "*Stop worrying about me. I'll soon be out of it.*"

"*Where are you now?*"

"*In Central.*" He supposed he was in Central for it seemed he'd been traveling for hours and he'd finally reached higher ground. A slight change in the sound of

the rain made him think there must be buildings close on either side.

L'Mara said, "*Everyone but Emmon and Grandmother Malla believes there'll be nothing more to worry about when the rain stops—except the bear, of course. What do you think?*"

"*I've already said I think the rain's only part of it. Somehow I'm going to find out —*"

He was interrupted by a low growl from Doubtful, and he asked quickly, "What is it—the bear?"

"Yes. I whiffed him. Real faint in the rain—but I think he's close."

Instantly, Boy Jaim turned out the searchlight. He went on blindly, using the light only to locate the path when he had strayed into the trees.

He was aware of the worried questioning in L'Mara's mind, and he told her, "*Doubtful got a whiff of the bear somewhere behind us—Can't understand what the thing's doing here, but I think we're safe …*"

He wasn't at all sure he was safe, and he was shaking with more than the cold as he tried to feel his way faster through the blackness. Once, above the roaring of the rain, he thought he heard a heavier and somehow different sound from the area back of them. He tried to tell himself it was only thunder in the distance, or perhaps a great tree that had fallen after having the ground washed away from its roots. Many great trees would fall tonight.

But as he rushed on, his thoughts finally centered on the bear. What was the Golden One doing in Central on a night like this? There had to be a reason.

The reason came to him more than an hour later, just as he was edging the sled along a wall toward a familiar gate. "Oh, no!" he gasped, as the truth struck him with shocking force.

Instantly L'Mara called in fright, "*What's happened? Where are you?*"

Before answering he caught up Doubtful and, leaving the sled on the path, hurriedly thrust open the gate and ran to the house.

Inside, while he tore off his sodden clothing and dug into a chest for a blanket, he told her, "*I'm all right—I'm home now—but I believe I know what the Golden One was doing in Central. He was wrecking the main storehouse.*"

He was aware of the shock in her as she replied, "*But—but that's where all the grains and dried things are kept! How awful! What are we going to do?*"

"*We can't do anything now. But everybody—all of us—had better get over there as soon as daylight comes, rain or no rain, and save what we can, or there won't be much to eat this winter …*"

Wearily he drew another blanket from the chest, then pulled it over Doubtful and himself as he sank upon the nearest couch. As soon as the chill left him he knew he'd better get up, build a fire, and go searching for food. He hadn't had anything since early morning, and if he put off eating till dawn there might not be time for it. He was only guessing about the storehouse, but within him was the sickening conviction that the bear had wrecked it. It was exactly the sort of thing the Golden One would do.

As he stretched out under the blanket his hands clenched in sudden hate for the implacable creature who was bringing such hardship to the Five Communities. Hate was a strange and awful emotion; he'd never felt it quite like this before. Then it swiftly faded as the sleep of exhaustion washed over him.

Doubtful's sharp bark awoke him at daylight. He lay still a moment, rubbing his eyes and wondering where he was. From the way he felt he was sure he couldn't have been asleep very long. Not more than an hour or so. Was that a bell he'd heard?

Suddenly, as memory flooded back, he was startled by hearing the bell again. Its quick, repeated ringing came from the corner of the hall. The sound brought him to his feet and he hastily drew one of the blankets over his shoulders. It was the emergency signal of the radiophone.

For an instant he was surprised that the set was still in working order, though there was no reason why it wouldn't be. It was just that he hadn't heard it for so long. He ran to it, turned on the speaker, and went rigid as he heard an excited Councilman from Central announce the destruction of the main storehouse. Every able-bodied person was asked to come immediately and help save the food.

It was the news Boy Jaim had been expecting, yet actually hearing it was a shock. For long seconds after he had turned off the speaker, he stood clutching the blanket around him, trembling in the chill. Through the window beside him he could see that the rain was still falling, though it was no longer the blinding deluge of last night. It was frightening, just the same, to feel the bite of winter in the air—and look out upon a world still covered with midsummer green.

What was going to happen? While people tightened their belts, would it turn colder and colder and colder?

All at once, with a despairing shake of his head, he began running through the house, searching for dry clothes. He found some old things of this father's and discovered they fitted him perfectly. It gave him a strange feeling to be wearing Big Jaim's clothes. He hadn't realized he'd grown so much.

He was very aware of his hunger by now. It was suddenly gnawing in him, but there wasn't time to cook any of the dried stuff stored in the lower level. The best he could do was open a jar of fruit his mother had put up years ago. It was much too sweet, though it took the edge from his appetite. Doubtful sniffed his share of it, then looked up at him reproachfully. It wasn't the sort of thing a dog could eat.

He was wondering what he could find to feed poor Doubtful, when he heard the door to the courtyard being quickly opened and closed. Reaching the hall, he saw L'Mara with a heavy basket in her hand. It was full of things to eat.

Her small face was pinched from lack of sleep, but her big eyes were popping. "I also brought your clothes," she said in a rush. "They're out in the sled." Then she burst forth excitedly, "No one would believe me last night when I told them what you said about the bear wrecking the storehouse. But he did! I just now flew by it—and there it was, all squashed down with the roof broken over it and the rain pouring in! It—it just makes you sick! What are we ever, ever—"

"I've heard about it," he interrupted. "There was an emergency call a few minutes ago—we've got to get over there fast. Feed Doubtful while I find some tools and sacks."

They were soon on their way with shovels and containers, and tools to break through the wreckage.

In the wet dawn the youngest herder listened silently while the oldest herder told what had happened.

"The hunters have the creature bottled up in a canyon, but there are not enough of them to go in after it. It's a dangerous spot, and the beast has every advantage. So they've sent for more men, and extra weapons. They plan to circle the canyon rim and blast the thing to death."

The youngest herder swallowed, but said nothing.

"Well," the other went on, "aren't you happy to hear about it? They'll kill it now. They'll blow it to pieces. Isn't that what you wanted?"

The youngest herder turned away. "I—I don't know …"

7

TRAP

At his first sight of the wrecked storage building Boy Jaim could only gape with a feeling of sick shock and disbelief. Everyone who saw it that morning had the same reaction. This just couldn't happen. The men who had planned the storehouse long ago had built it well. It was proof against the elements. It had to be, because it housed the extra food the Five Communities depended upon in an emergency.

Now the greatest emergency in memory was upon them—and here was the dreadful fact of collapsed walls burying everything inside under tons of rock, and a smashed roof funneling mud and rain into it.

It seemed impossible that the Golden One, with all his incredible strength, could have brought about such destruction. But he had. Boy Jaim saw the trench that had been cunningly clawed around part of the building, allowing the deluge of rain to wash out the foundation. For hours torrents had been pouring into the wreckage, soaking the grain. Mud, washed down from the higher ground, had already ruined much of it. If any of the remainder was to be saved, it would have to be done quickly.

People from Central were already frantically at work when Boy Jaim and L'Mara ran to help. Others were hurrying toward them from all directions. They toiled like Trojans, prying away stones and cutting holes through the roof to reach the grain. While grim members of the archery teams stood guard—for who was to say the beast wouldn't return and attack the crowd?—shovel squads worked madly to fill containers with soggy masses of stuff, which were flown to the nearest homes to be dried out.

The rewards for so much effort were unpleasantly small. By the middle of the afternoon hardly a tenth of the building's contents had been removed. The rest, lost in a soupy mixture of mud and debris, was beyond recovery.

Back home at last, Boy Jaim spread the final half-filled bag upon the flagstones in the main room. Here a fire had been kindled in the long-cold fireplace and the solar heat turned on. L'Mara's mother had flown over to help her, and the two were on their knees, trying to spread out the few bushels of sticky salvage so it would dry better. It covered the floor in a curious mix of mud-stained corn, wheat, and several kinds of beans.

The same scene, Boy Jaim knew, was being repeated in dozens of houses all around the area. Wearily he drew off his rain jacket and wet boots, then slumped down near the hearth to get the chill out of his body. Slowly his fists clenched and his jaws knotted.

Tira, straightening her tired back, glanced at him and sadly shook her golden head. "What's the matter, Boy Jaim?"

"Nothing," he mumbled.

She sighed. "Yes, there is. I can't pick up your thoughts like L'Mara, but I can guess what you're thinking. You're blaming yourself for what happened."

He stared at her a moment, biting his lip. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Well, isn't it my fault? Isn't it? If I'd killed the Golden One—and I could have if I'd tried—if I'd killed him when everyone wanted me to, we wouldn't be in this trouble now. We'd still have the storehouse."

"Possibly so. But you did what you believed was right—that's the main thing."

"But maybe I wasn't so right, after all. I mean, how can you be right if you make other people suffer? If I'd killed the bear—"

"No! Stand up for what you believe in. I was very upset about last night, but at the same time I was proud of you for saying what you did to Bors and the others. There's no excuse for senseless killing. I thought we'd progressed beyond that kind of thing, but it seems we haven't …"

Tira paused and shook her head again. "I don't mean that a person shouldn't fight back if he's attacked. That's why I brought all our bows over. I don't think anyone should go outside now without being armed. Frankly I—I'm afraid. Why that awful monster hasn't already killed someone …"

Boy Jaim said, "I don't think he will. Not directly, anyway."

"But didn't he attack you and Emmon?" asked L'Mara. "And—and I'm sure he would have tried to kill *us* if we'd got any closer."

"The only way I can figure that," he told her, "is that he just wants to kill me."

L'Mara gasped. "Kill you! But why?"

"I don't know why. Unless it's because I'm the only person who can talk to him. Maybe he doesn't want me to learn something." He shrugged. "Anyway, that's how it looks. If he'd wanted to, I'm sure he could have killed lots of us very easily. What was there to stop him? But he knows what's coming, so he just decided to destroy our food and let nature finish us off."

"You really don't think the rain—"

"It's not the rain, L'Mara. I tell you, the rain's just part of something else."

Tira's eyes were tragic. Almost in a whisper she said, "I can't understand it. It's like a nightmare. A beast like that, coming out of nowhere, hating us …" She looked up suddenly and asked, "If it isn't the rain, then what *is* it we have to worry about? Haven't you any idea at all?"

He shook his head wearily. "I—I can't even guess. But the Golden One knows. As soon as I've had some sleep, I'm going to try him again—"

"No!" Tira exclaimed. "I can't allow you—"

"I've got to," he said determinedly. "Can't you see? I don't want to kill him, and I wouldn't have much excuse for not killing him if I didn't try to find out what he knows. If I keep after him, I'm bound to learn something. Even if I learn it only a few hours ahead of time, it'll give us all a chance to get ready and save ourselves."

L'Mara said quickly, "A'right, but if you go, then I'm going with you!"

"Not this time. I may have to follow that bear around, and pester him for days. I know more about him now, and with Doubtful to help I'll be safe enough. Anyway," he added, "I'd rather have someone home I can keep in contact with all the time. It may be very important."

"*A'right,*" she told him silently. "*But you be careful, 'cause if anything happened*

to you I'd, well, I'd just die."

"That works both ways," he replied, as he got down on the floor and began helping them spread the grain.

"*Aw, I'm just a little girl to you. I just remind you of a squirrel …*"

"*What's wrong with that? You also look like Tira—*"

"*I don't! She's beautiful!*"

"*Sure, but that doesn't make you ugly.*"

Her jaw dropped, and she stared at him in such wide-eyed astonishment that he might have laughed if he hadn't been so exhausted. Didn't she realize that in a year or two she'd be the most stunning—Then his hands clenched as he stared out at the rain. In a year or two, if the Golden One had his way, none of this would matter, because there wouldn't be a soul left in the Five Communities.

Tira said, "Why don't you go and get some sleep? You look ready to drop."

"I'm all right. You need to rest more than I. You couldn't have had much sleep with that bunch of archers around all night."

She gave a little shrug. "It doesn't matter. The main thing is this grain. We've got to get it dried out before it spoils. Oh, this awful rain! If it doesn't stop soon —"

"It's getting worse. If you and L'Mara are going back to West Com this evening, maybe you'd better get started now. I'm afraid it's going to turn dark early again."

She shook her head. "We're staying here. Andru's got his friends with him—they're trying to plan how they can kill the bear—and they can all feed themselves." She paused and frowned at him. "Boy Jaim, listen to me."

"What is it?"

"When you go looking for that beast in the morning, I want you to take your bow."

"I—I can't do it. If I go armed, he'll know it, and I'll never learn a thing from him."

"You're sure of that?"

He nodded. "That's the way it has to be."

The rain increased with the early dark, but at dawn it slackened again, as it had the day before, and continued steadily with no sign of letting up. Boy Jaim studied it with a vague feeling of dread. The dread turned into a black foreboding as he hurried through breakfast, hardly touching the food the others had fixed, and got ready to leave. He knew L'Mara felt it, then realized Tira did too. Was the world coming to an end today? It almost seemed like it.

At the last minute Tira ran and brought the case that held his bow and arrows. Again she tried to make him take it. "You must!" she insisted. "I can't have you go out and face that creature without some way of protecting yourself."

For a moment he almost weakened. Then he thrust the case aside. "I've got to be honest with him," he said grimly. "Can't you see? If I'm not, he'll know it, and I won't have a chance. He won't even listen to me."

"Honest with a murderous beast like that?" she cried. "Why, he doesn't even know the meaning of the word!"

"Yes he does. He's honest in his way—he told me exactly how he felt about us, which sure wasn't much. Well, it's about time he heard another side of it …"

Tira shook her head despairingly and said no more. L'Mara, standing frozen and big-eyed beside her, did not speak until the house was out of sight behind him in the rain. Then she called silently, "*Please, Boy Jaim—please, please be careful! If he really wants to kill you, he'll try to trick you—so watch out for tricks.*"

He assured her that he'd keep his eyes open and told her to stop worrying. Then he gave his attention to the gray scene around him and headed slowly for North Com.

"I'm going to circle North Com and fly as low as I can," he explained to Doubtful. "You ought to be able to whiff him somewhere. If we don't pick up his trail that way, we'll surely find it on the river. He's got to eat."

"Phantoms don't eat," Doubtful mumbled.

"He's *not* a phantom. How many times do I have to tell you that? He's just as real as we are. He may be big, but he's still a bear, and all the bears I know eat fish."

"Ump."

"Ump what?"

The white dog hunched closer to him for warmth, then grumbled, "I never said he wasn't real. That's the whole trouble. I've seen and whiffed too many things like him in my sleep—now we've got one of 'em for real, and you tell me he's not a phantom. But your kind is supposed to know more than my kind …"

"Oh, have it your own way. He's a real phantom, and he eats phantom fish. Stick your whiffer out of the window and keep whiffing, or we'll never find him in this rain."

"It's not going to do us any good if we do find him. If we were half as smart as the birds, we'd be flying south."

"Flying south! Whatever for?"

"To get away from here. Isn't that reason enough?"

Boy Jaim frowned. "Doubtful, have you noticed any birds flying south?"

"Sure. Heard lots of them the other night, before the goats came."

So the birds had all flown away. No wonder they hadn't heard any singing. But why south? There was nothing down there but rocky hills full of caverns, then endless ocean, with strings of barren islets.

Then he remembered that at one time, according to old Emmon, birds and even some animals had migrated with the seasons. But that was ages ago when the winters were vicious and supposedly there were warm continents to the south. Or had the birds gone to the caverns?

He puzzled over the birds for a while, then forgot them as he caught sight of the flooded fields of North Com. All the low ground was under water. Ponds and widening lakes extended through much of the woods to join the distant river.

Somehow he hadn't realized how badly flooded the area had become. He'd had a feeling the Golden One would circle the Five Communities, but it was hardly likely with the water the way it was. As for fishing, that would be almost impossible with the rain-swollen river spread out over so much territory.

Where would the beast go?

Boy Jaim swung past the scattered houses on the higher ground and began cruising slowly over the wooded hills beyond them. Continually he sent his thoughts out, searching. It had always been easy for him to sense the presence of most creatures, if they were not too far away. But the Golden One was elusive.

The other evening, before the big rain came, the monster had appeared suddenly without any warning.

"Can you whiff anything?" he asked presently.

"Not exactly," Doubtful muttered unhappily.

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

"He's just in the air, but nowhere near. Or maybe it's just that I know he's somewhere around and wish he wasn't. Why can't you forget him?"

"You know I can't do that!"

Doubtful rolled doleful eyes up at him, then said plaintively, "We had such fine times together before he came. Life was good then. Why does it have to be the way it is now?"

"I don't know. I wish you'd stop talking like that." Boy Jaim ground his teeth together.

"I can't help how I feel. And I don't feel right. I wish he wasn't so smart. Why is he so smart?"

"He's a mutant," Boy Jaim mumbled. "I'm sure he's very old, and that he's learned how to use the Pool of Knowledge."

"What chance have we got against something like that?"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"Well then," Doubtful said glumly, "don't you think he ought to be killed before it's too late?"

"Oh, stop talking and help me find him!" Boy Jaim snapped irritably.

As he swung the sled around again L'Mara called, as she had been doing every few minutes, and asked his location. When he gave it, she said, "*Are there any sleds near you?*"

"*Can't make out any,*" he told her. "*But I can't see far in this rain.*"

"*Well, there ought to be a lot around you soon, flying in groups. Father's organized a big hunt. There'll be hundreds of sleds out, covering all the country. For the people who can't use bows, there will be explosives. Father and Councilman Traml are making them now.*"

L'Mara paused, and suddenly he sensed that something had upset her badly and that she was trying to keep it from him.

"*Go on,*" he urged. "*There's more. It has to do with Andru. Did he tell you to tell me something?*"

"*Yes,*" she admitted. "*He—he sends orders for you to come back and join the hunt. He says you know how to locate the bear better than anyone, and that if you don't help kill it he—he'll have you tried by the Council, and—and condemned to be an outcast.*"

Boy Jaim was stunned. Tried by the Council! Would Andru actually do that to him? Make an outcast of him?

He knew Andru would. It had been more than a century since the last person had been tried for bringing injury to a fellowman. He had been banished from the Five Communities. But Andru was in a rage over all that had happened. Someone must be blamed. And people were beginning to do things they wouldn't have dreamed of doing a week ago.

Despairingly he said, "*Tell Andru I—I've got to find the bear alone, and that I'll have nothing to do with his hunt.*"

By noon the sled he was using was beginning to act a little sluggish. He

wondered if he ought to go back and exchange it for another one, then decided it would be a waste of time. The rain, no doubt, would have affected all the sleds the same way.

Even so, he was almost thankful for the rain. It helped to mask his movements and kept him from being seen for any distance. The hunt was on now, and he had only to rise to treetop level to make out the gray dots of the first group of searchers flying over the hills. He kept low and took his time, staying behind the hills and following the little valleys that wound toward the river.

Each time he neared the river, he found it more and more difficult to turn away from it. “I still say he’s got to eat,” he muttered to Doubtful. “And that means fish. But where would he go to catch them?”

He flew cautiously out over the water and glanced downstream. It was a rush of swirling white, ever widening until it was lost in the gray distance. In the other direction it narrowed between high banks, and curved out of sight beyond the dim shape of an ancient stone mill. The waterfall beside which the mill had been built had all but vanished under the tremendous flow pouring over it. Today the river’s voice was a great roar.

After studying the banks carefully, Boy Jaim flew slowly upstream. As he neared the mill, he kept behind the sprawling structure and inched forward until he could make out the section of the river beyond the bend.

“Whiff anything, Doubtful?”

“Yes … Just caught it a little.”

“Is it coming from upstream?”

“Can’t tell in this rain. It’s sort of from all over.” Doubtful was suddenly trembling.

He put his arm around the dog and said, “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I won’t get too close to him.”

“It’s not that,” Doubtful muttered. “I just know things sometimes. Like I know we shouldn’t be here now.”

“Stop talking foolishness and keep your whiffer going! You know we’ve got to find that thing. Maybe we won’t learn much, but we can try.”

Angrily he sent the sled forward to the roof of the mill and held it there while he studied every foot of the curving stretch of water he could see ahead. Beyond the mill the river widened, and through the gray rain he could discern an area filled with great boulders. In today’s flood it would have been the best spot for a bear to fish—if that bear were as large as the Golden One.

Ignoring the downpour, he slid the top back for better vision. Finally, seeing no movement save the swirling water, he flew upstream to the boulders.

Doubtful’s sudden frenzy of barking jerked him to his feet. He looked wildly around at the foaming, rock-studded flood. There was still no sign of the beast.

“Where are you?” he cried, clenching his fist. “Answer me, Golden One! I know you are close. I’ve come in peace again—”

A boulder beneath him changed shape. In horror he gave the sled full power and tried to lift it to safety. Its response was too slow. Abruptly the river exploded with violent movement. A monstrous form boiled upward. For an instant he found himself staring into the cold black eyes of the creature that had tricked him, then a paw with the power of a thunderbolt smashed into the sled and tore it to bits.

Boy Jaim had a brief glimpse of Doubtful, teeth bared, hurling his insignificant little body forward in attack. Then Boy Jaim was flung through the rain with pieces of the sled, and in another second the icy river snatched him and whirled him away.

As he fought to keep his head up, something white appeared near him, struggling feebly. It was Doubtful. He tore off his clinging jacket and lunged for the dog, managing finally to get an arm around him. But even as he drew him close, he was aware that blood was staining the water and that Doubtful's eyes were glazing. Suddenly the feeble struggling stopped.

"Doubtful!" he gasped in agony. "Please don't die! Please …"

The river rolled him under, tore at him, and snatched the limp body away from his grasp. He fought his way to the surface, feeling an overwhelming sense of loss. Now, for the space of seconds that seemed to stretch into long minutes, it became a greater fight to get out of the river before he was swept to the mill and over the seething whiteness that had once been the falls.

A whirling eddy just in front of the mill saved him. The current thrust him into it and almost sent him past a broken and half-submerged window. Barely in time his numbed fingers caught the edge of the stone, and he managed to draw himself inside.

There were steps in the corner leading to the upper floor. He swam to them and climbed to another window that opened directly above the one by which he had entered. Gasping, numb with cold, and exhausted, he collapsed on the sill and stared blankly out into the rain while a vast emptiness in him slowly filled with hate.

Suddenly all the bitterness and blackness of hate surged through him like a violent poison. It shook him and brought him upright, thinning his lips and knotting his fists. He could not see the Golden One in the rain, but he could feel the nearness of the beast. He raised his trembling fists in defiance.

"I came in peace!" he cried hoarsely. "Peace! D'you hear me?" His voice rose to a scream. "I'll make you pay for what you've done! I'll kill you! If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll hunt you down and kill you!"

The youngest herder's star had not yet appeared above the band of mist in the east. While he watched for it, strangely upset, he thought of his lost dog and the beast that had killed it. The hunters had the thing bottled in a canyon. Had they destroyed it yet?

"*Is man so perfect,*" *the oldest herder was saying,* "*and are his needs so great, that he has rights over all creation?*"

"*How—how do you mean?*"

"*Suppose man wants trees for his own use, or a piece of land? He always takes them —and the creatures that lived in the trees or on the land move on. When they have nowhere to go, they die. When they dispute the rights of man, they also die.*"

"*Was it that way long ago, on the planet we came from?*"

"*I'm afraid it was.*"

8

AMBUSH

A tearful L'Mara flew to the mill and took Boy Jaim home after they had searched in vain downstream for Doubtful's body.

He did not remember calling for L'Mara, any more than he remembered shucking off his boots and jacket in order to escape the river. She appeared so quickly that he realized she must have been on her way while he was still in the water. There was no need at that moment for him to explain what had happened. It was all so agonizingly vivid in his mind that every terrible second of it must have been instantly communicated to her.

As he came into the house, clutching around him the blanket that L'Mara had brought, Tira ran to meet them.

"Boy Jaim!" she gasped. "What—what in the world …" Then in quick anxiety, "Where's Doubtful?"

He opened his mouth to tell her, and could not. They had never looked upon the dog as a pet. Doubtful had been part of the family, the youngest member, the bright child that everyone loved.

L'Mara sobbed, "The—the bear killed him."

"Oh, no!…"

Boy Jaim ground his teeth together and strode grimly through the house to find dry clothing. When he returned he was fully dressed again and ready to leave.

"Where's my bow?" he asked.

"Wait," said Tira. "You can't go right back—"

"I'm going," he ground out. "My bow …"

There was no room in him at the moment for anything but hate. It was a black force that drove all else from his mind. He wanted only to rush out into the rain, find the treacherous monster, and destroy him.

Tira placed firm hands on his shoulders and pressed him into a seat by the fire. "Listen to me, Boy Jaim," she began. "I know how you feel. But don't forget that L'Mara and I have a stake in this too. We loved Doubtful. As for you—you are important to both of us, especially to L'Mara." She paused, and her voice shook a little as she continued, "We both want to see that creature dead—but not at the expense of losing you. If you go out the way you are now, all wrought up, you won't have a chance with him. Surely you realize that."

He glanced up at her grimly, his jaws knotting, then looked down at the floor, which was still covered with drying grain. Outside, above the steady drum of rain on the roof, he was aware of the rushing of many air sleds going past. Dozens, from the sound of them. And there would be dozens and dozens more, combing every foot of land around the Five Communities. It seemed impossible

that the scheming beast could escape so many hunters. But of course he would. What chance had the hunters against such intelligence?

L'Mara obviously reading his thoughts, said, "They—they've nothing to worry about, but you have. You know now he'll try to kill you if he has the chance. Why has he picked on you? Is it because he knows you're the only person who can hurt him?"

He shook his head. That might be one of the reasons, yet there was another reason, more important, that eluded him. But it didn't matter. He couldn't sit here all afternoon, doing nothing.

Suddenly he lurched to his feet. "I'm wasting time," he muttered. "I've got to find him …"

"No!" L'Mara cried fiercely, clenching her small hands. "No, no, no! You don't even know where you're going, and if you start out now—"

"I'll find him somehow! Where's my bow?"

"No!" she cried again and all at once flew at him and began beating him back with her little fists. "Please—please! If you go out without some kind of a plan, he'll just trick you again. You've got to be smarter than he is! You've got to! Can't you understand?"

He'd never seen L'Mara so intense and determined. Slowly he sat down again. There was, in fact, no resisting her. Their minds were so close that, in moments like this, it was almost like having one mind. Unspoken between them, but suddenly realized and felt more strongly than ever, was the fact that in the future neither could live with anyone but the other. To attempt anything else was simply unthinkable. It would always be the two of them, and if something happened to one, it would be like the end of both.

"*And nothing must happen,*" she told him silently. "*That's why we must plan this —oh, so carefully—before you go out again.*"

"*All right, little squirrel.*"

There was no lessening of the hate in him. But now he felt able to step aside from it and think coldly how to do what had to be done.

Aloud, L'Mara said, "Do you believe he'll stay anywhere near the river?"

He shook his head. "I—I doubt it. He might return there at night, but he's much too smart to ever let himself be seen in the same place twice."

"Then where would he go?"

"That's what I've been wondering. I've almost got it—it's something to do with food."

"You mean he wants something besides fish to eat?"

"Yes. If I can think what it is, I'll have him beat."

Tira said, "Don't bears like berries?"

"We'll have to rule them out in his case. I mean, he's so big. If I could remember a plum thicket somewhere that had a lot of plums …"

They were silent for a while, thinking. Tira picked up a tray of grain and began picking debris from it. "This is still wet," she murmured absently. "It might be better if we took it all down to the lower level. It's surprising how dry and warm it is down there, especially in that back area cut into the rock. If it stays up here, and the rain keeps on much longer—"

"It won't," Boy Jaim mumbled. "It'll stop tonight."

Tira looked at him sharply. "What makes you say that?"

He shrugged. “It just came to me.”

“I hope you’re right. Only, what’s going to happen when the rain stops?”

“It’ll turn hot.”

“Really?” Again her eyes sharpened on him. “How can you be so sure, Boy Jaim?”

“I—I don’t know. But I’m sure.”

She sighed. “It’s strange, but I do believe you. What’s going to follow the heat? Terrible cold? Or would it be something to change the land, like a tremendous earthquake? That’s what Emmon seems to think.”

He shook his head. “Emmon thinks I ought to know, but I—I can’t tell.”

She sighed again. “It’s curious how some answers come to you, and not others. Maybe, in time … Anyway, I’ve been wondering what to do about the food supplies. Most families have enough dried and canned things to last them a few months—if they are very careful. But where is the safest place for storage? Did you know that your mother put up lots of fruit, and gallons and gallons of honey in glass jars? It’s safe enough down in the lower level—unless there’s an earthquake. Then all of it would be lost. So I almost believe it would be wiser—”

“Honey? That’s what I was trying to think of!”

L’Mara looked at him in quick comprehension. Her startled thought was so strong it was almost as if she had spoken aloud. “*Of course! When he’s tired of fish he’ll rob some of the hives. But which ones?*”

He jerked to his feet again and began stalking around the room past the little piles of grain. Suddenly he paused. “Most of the hives are near West Com. But I remember flying over some this morning that were closer to the river.”

Where had he seen them? There’d been over a hundred of them, it seemed, all grouped under the trees on one side of an overgrown field. A golden field that was a mass of wild flowers in full bloom …

Then it came to him. “I know—it’s that old pasture with the broken-down walls, straight across the hills from here. It gives the best honey anywhere.”

He saw L’Mara staring at him, her face suddenly pinched and white, her eyes enormous. “Yes,” he ground out, answering her unspoken question. “That’s where he’ll go. Tonight. And when he comes, I’ll be there waiting for him.”

It was still raining early in the evening when he left. He used the old work sled he’d dragged into the courtyard to recharge—how many days ago? It was hard to remember, so much had happened. The sled was sluggish and awkward to handle, but it didn’t greatly matter. He wouldn’t need it for long.

The light was beginning to fail a little as he neared the pasture, but the hunt that had been going on most of the day had not yet stopped. In nearly every direction he could make out the vague shapes of other sleds. The hunters were flying low now, and very slowly, in a final futile effort to examine every likely hiding place before dark caught them.

He carefully avoided them and took pains to conceal his direction by flying between the trees whenever possible. Near the lower end of the pasture, on the opposite side from the hives, he came down in a small opening in the woods well away from the crumbling stone wall that surrounded the area. For minutes afterward he sat motionless, listening and watching, trying to estimate the wind and the rain while he went over his plan.

The beast could come at any time from now on, in spite of the hunters. It would have been hard for them to see him, even in bright daylight. Didn't they know that a bear—any bear—could move through the brush within a few yards of a person, and they'd never even guess it? But of course not. People like Bors and Andru, who never ventured far into the forest, had no idea how stealthy some of the creatures there could be.

Quietly, watchfully, Boy Jaim took out his bow, strung it, and placed it beside him. It was a beautiful thing of laminated wood that he and old Zimah had spent long weeks making, and he disliked the idea of getting it wet. But it was waterproof, even to the string. From the quiver he removed three arrows, which he'd decided were all that he could skillfully handle at one time. While one arrow was on the string, the other two would be clasped against the bow with his left hand, ready for instant use. One arrow ought to be enough, but he would use them all …

He hardly glanced at the metal points, blackened with poison. When he had asked Tira about it earlier, she'd said, "The rain won't wash it off. It's a sort of gum that's dried on the metal. Andru tells me it'll melt very quickly at blood temperature."

"How—how long does it take to kill?"

"Well, I understand the goats they tried it on died in just a few seconds—as soon as the poison began to melt. It—it has a violent reaction."

"That's good," he'd muttered savagely. "I hope he dies slowly, with the poison burning him up inside."

Then, seeing the look on L'Mara's face, he'd asked, "What's the matter?"

"Your hate," she'd whispered. "It—it just pours from you! You've got to hide it somehow when you go out, or it will give you away. That beast will know you're there."

She was right, of course. He had to keep his mind almost a blank and even shut L'Mara out of it. Doing all that took effort, but he managed it now by concentrating on his surroundings and the steps he had to take next.

He slid out of the raincoat he had worn, and rolled it up and thrust it and the quiver with the remaining arrows under one of the safety straps on the sled. The cold rain immediately soaked through the heavy jacket he was wearing, but he grimly ignored it. Better the cold and wet than a rustling coat that could catch on things and bind his movements.

He picked up the bow, nocked an arrow, then clutched the remaining two arrows against the bow handle and moved cautiously to the stone wall. Here he paused and peered over the top to study the meadow and the distant hives. Finally he crouched, turned to the right, and began moving silently along the wall to a place where there had once been a gate.

At the break in the wall he got down on his knees and peered around the edge of the stones. The rows of hives, dim under the trees, were still more than sixty yards away. He debated going closer, but decided against it. What if the poison didn't work fast enough? Everything considered, this was about right. Unless, of course, he couldn't make out the hives when dark came. But he believed he could. It depended on the rain.

In his jacket pocket was a small light for use in an emergency, but he prayed it wouldn't come to that. How can you hold a light on your target and shoot at the

same time? The target—he was very careful to think of it simply as a target and not as a living creature—was almost sure to approach from the woods around the upper end of the meadow. The river was in that direction.

The target just might come from the rear—but the sled was hidden beyond any chance discovery, and the hunter was hidden and protected by the wall. The only thing that worried Boy Jaim was his own scent—the man-scent that, according to Doubtful, was so strong that a little of it clung to everything that was touched, and so unusual that it stood out above all other scents. But perhaps the rain would wash it away. The wind, at least for the moment, was in his favor.

The night was coming swiftly now. With the bow ready for instant use, he tried to make himself comfortable while he watched the edges of the meadow. Gradually the hives faded into the deepening shadow. There was an uneasy minute when he was afraid the dark would swallow them and he would be forced to move closer. But after night had settled around him he could still make out their vague shapes. Surely the target would be much easier to see.

Suddenly, without any warning, the rain stopped. In the following stillness, broken only by the steady drip of moisture from the trees, he peered about apprehensively. The rain, he realized, had been a protection. Now he hardly dared change position for fear his movements would be heard.

His apprehension grew as the night brightened. What was happening? He glanced up quickly and saw that the sky was clearing. Stars were beginning to gleam above him, and—Was that the moon coming up over the trees to the east? It was. *Almost a full moon!*

In shock he pressed closer to the crumbling wall and hunched nearer to the ground, unconsciously trying to make his body smaller. It had been so long since he'd seen the night sky that he'd forgotten about the moon. It was getting brighter by the second, and the moment it rose high enough above the trees it would be shining directly on him.

What should he do?

He could see the hives as clearly now as he could earlier in the evening. It would be foolish as well as dangerous to remain here when he could easily hit the target at twice the distance.

Cautiously he started to ease backward. His foot scraped with a rasping sound over a pile of unnoticed rubble that had fallen from the wall, and he froze. In the stillness the noise seemed loud enough to be heard all over the meadow. While he waited, listening, he was surprised to hear a frog begin peeping somewhere in a puddle of rainwater far behind him. Another frog joined it, and presently the voices of hundreds of frogs were raised in a chorus that rang from both sides of the meadow.

At any other time but now the frog chorus would have come pleasantly to his ears. It was a sound of life in a world that almost seemed dead. But frogs are sensitive, and he knew that the moment he started moving again their loud peeping would stop. The target, if near enough, would know instantly that something was wrong.

Creatures like the target, Boy Jaim remembered, couldn't see as well as they could hear. So perhaps it would be wiser to remain where he was. But he'd have to keep absolutely still.

For a long while time seemed to slow down for Boy Jaim. Gradually the

moisture ceased to drip from the trees. The air, so cold during the rain, began to turn warm. The moon—no longer gold, but an odd reddish color—climbed higher until it shone directly upon him. Only the streamers of mist that were beginning to rise above the meadow kept him from feeling completely exposed. Even so, he wished now that he had a more powerful weapon than the primitive bow. A weapon made for killing, like one of those deadly and destructive guns used during the day of the wheel, something that blasted flesh and bone and brought screaming agony to its victim …

For a brief moment he forgot to guard his thoughts. Black rage shot through him as he remembered the treachery that had killed poor Doubtful. His hands shook. Oh, if he could only smash the beast and bring endless pain upon it …

"*Careful!*" L'Mara pleaded, instantly aware of his rise of feeling.

With an effort he put the hate aside and tried to think only of the target. A large, pale, formless target that would appear presently among the hives. He had only to hit it with an arrow, hit it anywhere, and the deadliness of the poison would mean swift destruction.

Why didn't the target come? Had he made a mistake and chosen the wrong place to wait?

His legs were becoming numb from crouching motionless for so long. In a few minutes he would be forced to stand and rub circulation into them.

At that moment, abruptly, the frog chorus stopped.

From the shadows across the meadow something called to him.

"Boy Jaim?"

Shock went through him. The great beast had come, and it knew he was here, waiting for it. But he could not shoot, for it was hidden in the shadows beyond the streamers of mist.

"Boy Jaim," the creature called again. "Listen to me. There is something you should know."

The star was very bright when it finally appeared, and the youngest herder found it vastly comforting. His thoughts went to the planet that surely revolved around it. Could that planet be man's old home?

When he'd asked about it earlier, the oldest herder had said, "It could be, though we may never know for sure. I understand we lost contact with the old planet after we left."

"What happened?"

"No one knows. Those who came here were colonists, trying to escape something they didn't like. No ships followed us, and no message ever came. But man could never get along with his brother. Maybe, if he'd ever learned to consider other creatures …"

9

CONTEST

For long seconds after the beast had spoken, Boy Jaim managed to stay motionless, hardly daring to breathe. Why had the creature called to him? Did it really have something to tell—or was this just another trick? He felt an almost overpowering desire to answer, as if an iron intelligence had gripped his mind, willing him to break the silence. Only the knowledge of the great bear's treachery made it possible for him to hold his tongue.

"Boy Jaim," the beast called for the third time. "Answer me. You must hear what I have to say."

Again he felt that compelling urge to speak. But the thing knows I'm here, he thought. If he has something to tell me, why doesn't he say it?

Then all at once he realized the reason. In spite of the bright moonlight, the Golden One couldn't see him.

That had to be it. Bears depended upon smell and hearing far more than sight. The monster knew he was somewhere close, armed to kill, but his exact location was still unknown. If he could be made to speak, or even to move a little bit, he would be pinpointed and the bear would have the advantage.

At the moment it was a stalemate.

Boy Jaim tried to ignore the numbness creeping through his legs and concentrated on the shadows in the area of the hives. He could make out nothing worth the risk of an arrow.

What would the creature do next?

He tried to put himself in the Golden One's place, but his growing discomfort made it difficult to think. He ground his teeth and forced himself to remain motionless while he watched and waited. Time dragged. There came an agonizing minute when he knew he had reached the end of his endurance. He must stand up and get some circulation back into his legs.

Slowly he rose. A few scattered frogs that had begun peeping again instantly fell silent. His eyes roved the meadow and the encircling trees. Had his own movement stopped the frogs, or had something else done it?

His legs throbbed and needles began shooting through his numbed feet. Where was the Golden One? Had the creature sighted him when he stood up, and was it even now creeping through the trees on one side or the other, trying to get behind him? A coldness went through him as he thought of the incredible stealth he faced. No shadow could be more soundless.

Without turning his head he swung his eyes to the right and strained to see as far as he could over his shoulder. At the same time, carefully, he sent his thoughts out, gently probing.

His eyes saw nothing that moved but the slowly drifting streamers of mist. Yet

something was out there behind him. He could sense it.

How far it was from him he could only guess, but he knew instantly that he had only seconds to decide what to do.

His muscles tightened and his mind raced. If he turned to shoot too soon, the incredibly swift beast could easily evade the first arrow and be upon him before he loosed the second. But if he shot a moment too late, there wouldn't be time to escape the sweep of one of those mighty paws, even though he killed the thing.

Very slowly he began shifting his feet. They felt like half-alive stumps. Again he sent his thoughts forth to probe—but now he was unable to sense anything near him. For an instant of shock and uncertainty he wondered if he'd made a mistake. Then it came to him that the Golden One had detected his mental search and was evading it. The monster must be creeping close …

In a flash Boy Jaim whirled and drew the arrow to his ear.

His pulse was racing like his mind. For the agonizing space of a dozen heartbeats he could make out nothing in the mist. There were just the trees, the pools of black shadow in the moonlight, and the long mist streamers that were drifting over the wall and across the meadow. The mist was much denser in one area, but something kept urging him to look away from it.

The sudden memory of poor Doubtful broke the spell. The tricky beast! Rage exploded within him.

"You dirty devil!" he screamed, loosing the first arrow. "Die! Die!"

He heard the arrow strike an invisible limb and knew that it must have glanced to one side of his target. But already he was fitting the second arrow to the string and swiftly drawing it to his ear.

As it left the bow, movement erupted from the mist, and he saw the second arrow graze one monstrous shoulder and fly harmlessly into the night. The great beast had leaped ahead of the shot.

Now it was charging him. Hardly thirty yards away, it bore down upon him with the swiftness of the wind.

Boy Jaim screamed his hate and shot his last arrow. He could not see where it struck, for time had run out for him. He whirled and tried to leap around the break in the wall to the other side. His leaden feet refused to respond. A stone tripped him, and he fell.

The creature was upon him now, but moving too fast to stop. It swerved toward him, spun, and a great paw that could have smashed him like a fly arced downward. But he was already spinning on his elbows, scrambling away, and trying to gain his feet and run. Then he was up and plunging forward along the outside of the wall.

The wall was his only hope. When he was sure the creature had left the gate and was racing behind him, he put all his power into a spring and flipped quickly over into the meadow.

Hardly had he run three paces in the wall's shadow when he heard a great crash behind him. Stones flew in all directions. One grazed his head and sent him reeling to his knees. For a moment it seemed impossible to escape the thing that so wanted his life, but when he was able to look up he was astounded to see the monster charging straight into the meadow.

Halfway to the hives the beast stopped abruptly. The moonlight glinted on something stuck in its shoulder. Boy Jaim stared at it. It was his third arrow. He

watched with a growing horror as the great golden creature reared upward, quivering in a frenzy from the poison that was now coursing through its body. All at once a terrible cry burst from it—a petrifying sound of agony and rage and despair—then suddenly it seemed to go out of its mind. It whirled about, snapping its teeth and snarling, and charged erratically through the hives, scattering them right and left. Finally it burst through the wall to the right of them and vanished in the woods on the other side.

Stunned, Boy Jaim remained where he had fallen, his unsteady hands clutching at the meadow grass. All the hate he'd felt so short a while ago had vanished. In its place had come a rising sickness, a revulsion for what he had done.

Then he became aware of L'Mara's frantic questions beating through his mind.

"*I'm all right,*" he told her. "*I—I shot the thing— but something awful has happened. The bear didn't die. He—he's gone mad.*"

"*Oh, dear! How—what—*"

"*It's the poison. It didn't affect him the way it's supposed to. Instead of killing him, it's burning him up inside, and he's gone crazy with the pain.*" He paused, and added grimly, "I—*I've got to go after him and put him out of his misery.*"

He was aware of her shock. "*But,*" she protested, "*are you sure you have to? Andru says there's enough poison on every point to kill dozens of creatures like him. And you know what it did to the goats! Isn't he bound to die anyway? Boy Jaim, please! This could be another one of his tricks—*"

"*It's no trick,*" he replied. "*He's in the worst kind of agony—I can feel it in him. I've got to go after him.*"

At this moment of horrid victory, the last thing he wanted to do was follow the monster and finish what he'd started. But it had to be done. Just how he was going to manage it he didn't know. With another poisoned arrow? The thought made him shudder. He'd have to try it, of course, but if it didn't work quickly he'd have to use some other means. His knife, perhaps, or some sort of a spear …

Where was his bow?

He found it under some of the rocks that had been knocked over when the Golden One crashed through the wall. The only damage was a broken string.

He raced back to the sled, restrung the bow with a spare string from the case, then rose and flew over the treetops in the direction the wounded beast had taken.

To follow it was unpleasantly easy. Unless he closed his mind to it, the Golden One's agony was like a red and violently burning beacon. It led him across the river, over the chain of hills on the other side, and straight into the great forest. As the slow minutes passed he found himself praying that the creature would die before he caught up with it. It was moving at a furious pace, so it was bound to collapse soon.

Then, like a clap of thunder in his mind, it came to him that this might be his chance—his one possible chance—to find out about the calamity that was soon to happen. The great bear knew. There could be no doubt about that. Perhaps, before it died, the madness would leave and it would tell what he wanted to know. Or, if it refused, perhaps he could *make* it tell.

This last thought seemed almost inhuman to him, but Boy Jaim hardened

himself to it. If it had to be, it just had to be. With so many lives at stake, you couldn't quibble over how you saved them …

Now, instead of wishing for the creature to die quickly, he began praying that it would live until he caught up with it. Worriedly he tried to coax more speed from the balky sled. Nothing he did to it helped in the least. It had been in storage too long and had had too little time for recharging. Gradually it was beginning to slow down.

On the other hand the pain-racked beast ahead seemed tireless. If anything, the violence of the poison was driving it at an ever-faster pace. He wouldn't have believed that the monster, in spite of its size and strength, could actually move faster than the sled. But it was.

Still, it couldn't keep this up for long. The poison was a temporary stimulant, goading it past endurance. Presently it would be forced to drop from sheer exhaustion. But would the sled's power hold out that long?

Suddenly Boy Jaim wished he'd gone back and exchanged sleds before he had tried to follow the beast. It was too late for that now, and he was much too far away. Of course, L'Mara could bring him a better sled, but that wouldn't be so wise. L'Mara was his only link with home. If he learned anything important, it would have to be sent through her.

The Golden One, as nearly as he could judge, was almost a mile ahead of him now. For a long while he concentrated on it, expecting it to collapse at any minute. The beast did not even pause. Nor did there seem to be much change in its pace. It was slowing a little—though not enough to make much difference in the mile that separated them.

Suddenly a startling thought came to him. What if the great bear recovered?

But this was a possibility Boy Jaim was not ready to face, and instantly he put it aside. If the bear was slowing, so was the sled, and there was the worrisome likelihood that the sled would run out of power in the next few minutes, and he would have to come down. It had already flown far longer than he'd dared hope it would.

Where was the creature heading? Toward the Barrens? It seemed that way—but why in the world would it go there?

To make sure of his direction, he glanced up at the stars to get his bearings.

The first thing he saw was the moon, and the sight of it frightened him. It was past the zenith and moving westward down the sky at a sharp angle from the bear's course. It told him that the Golden One was indeed heading for the Barrens—but the fact did not register immediately. All that registered was the moon's color. It was red. Not reddish, as it had been earlier, but a terrible, unearthly, burning red.

He had been so intent upon following the bear that he did not know whether the color change had come gradually, or had happened in the last few minutes. Even the sky seemed curiously light, as if dawn were not far away—but he was given no time to speculate on the meaning of this, for suddenly the balky sled began to slip downward.

During the next few seconds he had his hands full trying to avoid the treetops rising to meet him. He had already passed over a small hillock, almost barren of growth on top. It was the only open spot in sight, and somehow he managed to spiral back to it and make a landing, without too great a jolt, upon the

weathered rocks.

He knew he was lucky to have made it, but he did not feel that way. The hillock would catch the first light of the morning sun, and the sled would gather power enough to fly within an hour. What would happen to the bear in the meantime?

The maddened creature was still rushing through the forest, though it was becoming difficult to sense it in the distance. Would it be alive in the morning—and would he be able to locate it then?

Despairingly he realized he might as well get what rest he could, for there was nothing more he could do now.

As he stretched out on the sled, L'Mara called suddenly.

"*Boy Jaim! Have you seen the moon?*"

"*Of course I've seen it! How could I miss it?*"

"*But—but what's happening? It looks awful!*"

"*I don't know what's happening, but it's probably just volcanic gas or dust high up in the atmosphere.*" He said it only because she was frightened, and it was the first reason that came to his mind. "*Have you called Emmon about it?*"

"*I've tried to, but he doesn't answer. It's all so scary.*"

"*Stop worrying about it and get some sleep.*"

"*My goodness, how can anyone sleep with things the way they are? Where are you now?*"

She wanted to come after him, but he ordered her to stay where she was. "*I'm more than halfway to the Barrens,*" he said. "*It would be after daylight before you could fly here and find me. You've got to remain near a phone in case I learn something.*"

"*But how can you ever—*"

"*I don't know how, but I'll manage it somehow. Just pray that bear's alive when I catch up with him …*"

"*But—but I thought you wanted him dead!*"

"*I've changed my mind.*"

The long hunt was over. The cunning beast had escaped the canyon's trap, and the beaten hunters had returned.

"*It's strange,*" *the youngest herder said that evening.* "*I wanted to see that thing killed. But now, well—*"

"*You feel better knowing it escaped?*" *the oldest herder asked quietly.*

"*I—I guess so. I know it's dangerous, and that it hates us, but somehow I can't blame it anymore. If other creatures had treated us the way we've treated them—*"

The youngest herder stopped and stared into the east where his star was rising. "*Look!*" *he exclaimed.* "*Something must be wrong. Its color has changed!*"

10

THE BARRENS

During the brief period that he managed to sleep, Boy Jaim dreamed of the days behind him. It began as a happy dream, full of birdsong, of the time when he and Doubtful roamed the forest together and all creatures were his friends. Then abruptly the dream changed. Terror came, and the world turned red with a great burning …

He sat up suddenly, wide awake on the instant. It was morning, but no song of birds greeted him. Over the silent forest the sun had risen—a red sun, monstrous and flaming, in a sky like brass.

He gaped at it in awe. Was the world coming to an end? But when L'Mara called a moment later he managed to hide his fears and pretend there was little to worry about.

"*It's just gas or something in the upper air*," he assured her. "*Have you been able to talk to Emmon about it?*"

"*Yes*," she replied. "*He said what you did earlier—that volcanoes are causing it. He thinks they must be spouting up from the sea somewhere. Everybody's afraid. But Emmon said if the volcanoes are far enough away, we may not have too much to worry about, even though there are bound to be earthquakes. What—what do you think, Boy Jaim?*"

He hesitated. Emmon, of course, was doing his best to keep people calm until there was more information. It came to him with a jolt that what was happening now was hardly a beginning and might have no connection whatever with the great terror that was coming. He could not even guess the nature of it, but he knew it was approaching fast. It was only hours away. Hours …

Suddenly he said, "*Tell Emmon to take some of his bees inside and put them deep in the safest part of his hill. And he'd better do the same with some of the goats.*"

"*But—but why?*"

"*I—I don't know. It's just an idea. Suppose something poisonous in the air killed off all the bees and goats—and don't think it can't happen. Do you realize there'd never again be any honey and milk?*"

"*Oh, how awful! But all the Elders are advising us to move out of the houses until this is over. Earthquakes—*"

"*There may be earthquakes—I don't know yet. Just tell Emmon what I said. Now I've got to hurry and find that bear. There isn't much time …*"

How many hours did they have? Four? Five? All he had to go on was a sudden feeling of urgency, as if a string were being slowly tightened in his mind. In rising uneasiness he sent his thoughts probing through the forest. They touched upon nothing living.

Was the Golden One dead? His jaws knotted and he shook his head, refusing to

consider the possibility. The great bear had to be alive. Probably it had reached the Barrens and was out of range of his probing.

The sled was afloat again in the morning sun. Impatiently he sent it skimming over the forest, in the same direction he had flown during the night. In the unnatural heat a growing thirst began to trouble him. For a long while he managed to ignore it, but finally it became a torment.

The unpleasant white gleam of the Barrens in the distance reminded him of the scarcity of water ahead, and of the foolishness of going on without it. He changed course and presently slid down beside one of the small streams that flowed into the river.

To save time he gulped a few quick swallows from the stream, then hurriedly searched through the sled's locker for an old plastic bucket, which he cleaned out and filled. In less than a minute he was on his way with the bucket between his knees.

Now the burning heat seemed worse, and he thought longingly of the covered sled he should have taken last night. He sipped from the bucket, splashed a little water on his face, then grimly tried to concentrate on locating the bear.

Ahead the white gleam broadened. It spread to the horizon as the forest below him began to thin and diminish. Still his probing thoughts touched nothing that seemed alive.

He slowed, then let the sled drift, while he carefully went over the area ahead with eye and mind. In the stillness the sun's blistering touch was almost unbearable. Its brassy glare upon the Barrens seemed to intensify the awfulness of the place.

It was a vast stretch of utter desolation, a desert of scorched sand and worn gray rubble unrelieved by a single tree. Even after all the rain the only green to be seen was in an occasional scabrous patch of cactus. Here and there in the pitted rubble—there were depressions and pits everywhere—rose curious shapes of eroded stone. The shapes might once have been buildings, though it seemed impossible that man had ever lived here—and that man alone could have been responsible for such a nightmare world.

Boy Jaim's attention kept returning to a sunken area in the distance. It twisted like a deep scar across the rubble. As with many of the other depressions, it could have been caused by a cave-in. He flew to it and began drifting along one edge. Suddenly he became sharply attentive as he sensed feeling of some kind below him.

For a moment he thought it was pain that he sensed. Then, with a little shock, he realized it was thirst.

The Golden One lay motionless in the shadow of the ravine wall, the arrow still protruding from high on the left shoulder. The great beast's eyes were closed. If breath remained in the mighty body, Boy Jaim could not have detected it from outward signs. It was only by that silent and almost mindless craving for water that he knew his enemy still lived.

For a moment, as he stepped cautiously from the sled, he wondered if this could be another trap. Then, a dozen yards away in the shadow, he saw the deep pool of rainwater, with no tracks leading to it. The truth was evident. Water had drawn the creature here, but it had collapsed before the pool could be reached.

Now the great bear was dying.

Boy Jaim snatched up the bucket he had brought, and ran and poured its contents into the Golden One's partially open mouth. Retreating, he stood tense, waiting. Seconds passed. The bear did not move.

Abruptly his attention went to the arrow. Had all the poison been dissolved from the point? What would happen if he pulled the thing out?

Again he ran forward, seized the arrow and quickly withdrew it, and flung it away. Black liquid oozed from the bear's shoulder. He caught up the bucket, raced to the pool and filled it, and poured water over the wound. Cleansed, the wound almost magically began to close and heal.

He brought more water, let some of it drip into the monstrous mouth, then left the bucket beside it on the sand and hastened back to the sled. With the strung bow in his hand and one of the remaining black-tipped arrows on the string, he stood grimly watching his enemy.

A tremor shook the great golden body. At last, very slowly, the creature's head came up and turned to the bucket. When the water was gone, Boy Jaim brought more, and still more, until the terrible thirst was quenched.

Now from the Golden One, weakly, came the first directed thought. "*Why … spare me now … Boy Jaim?*"

Muscles knotted in Boy Jaim's jaws. "If you feel any gratitude for being spared, you can easily repay me."

The beast's eyes flickered open, then closed. "You … still wish to know … the thing that will happen?…"

"Yes!"

"You honestly think … your people … are worth it?"

"Of course they're worth it!" Boy Jaim cried. "What right have you to decide such a matter as life and death?"

Something like a sigh came from the Golden One's throat. "No more right than man … but man has always taken that right. Don't you realize … that you belong to a race of destroyers? The most terrible … and uncaring … destroyers this planet has ever known?"

"I don't believe it!"

"It is the truth."

Boy Jaim trembled with sudden anger. "I didn't follow you here to listen to your crazy ideas about people! I came to save them! What's going to happen?" He raised the bow and drew back on the arrow. "Tell me!" he cried. "Tell me—or by the stars above, I'll make you burn with another dose of poison—and this time you'll die!"

"Then … you had better kill me," the creature replied. "If all men were like you … they might be worth saving. But they are not … So it is better that they perish …"

Slowly the great head raised. The black eyes opened. "Shoot, Boy Jaim!"

Boy Jaim stared desperately at his enemy. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, but for the moment he could not. He trembled. Suddenly, in angry frustration, he flung his bow aside. Tears came to his eyes.

All at once he cried out, "What—what in the name of God has man ever done to you?"

“He destroyed all of my kind, Boy Jaim.”

“That can’t be true! Unless—unless it was for self-protection. Anyhow, it’s been hundreds of years since people were last forced … but you couldn’t possibly be old enough to remember—”

“I am older than you think, Boy Jaim. And my memory goes back before my time. Long before. It is not pleasant to remember so much—especially when one is alone. It was not for self-protection that man killed my kind. He did it for sport.”

“You—you’re wrong! You’re bound to be. No one *ever* took life for the fun of it. For food, maybe, or to save himself—I know early man ate flesh, but that was ages ago. You can’t tell me—”

“Look at me, Boy Jaim.”

Against his will, Boy Jaim found himself staring into the Golden One’s cold ebony eyes. The great beast was stronger now, and there was power in the thought that commanded him: *Gaze into the past. Remember what you see.*

Suddenly everything around him vanished. Instead of being in a ravine in the Barrens, he stood on the edge of a wooded hill with a great house in the background. Before him men and women with guns were shooting at birds being frightened past by servants in the meadows below. To one side was a great pile of dead birds. They were not being shot for food, for other servants were arranging huge platters of food on tables under the trees.

For a moment of shock Boy Jaim could not believe the evidence of his eyes. But he could hear the sharp booming of the guns, the gay talk of the shooters, and smell the rich odors of the food. In rising horror he cried out against the sight.

Instantly the scene changed. In swift succession he saw the slaughter of countless grazing creatures, of great animals unknown to him, and of proud and beautiful beasts that no man would ever see again. Not for food were they hunted. They went down in red pain for the glory of the hunter, who kept only their spotted skins, or their horns, or their trophy heads. The last to die were two huge bears, who fought man to the final breath to save a golden cub. The cub escaped, to wander forever alone …

“Stop it!” Boy Jaim screamed, putting his hands over his eyes. “Stop it! I’ve seen enough!”

Abruptly he was in the Barrens again, in the ravine facing the Golden One. Gasping, sick at heart, he fell back against the rocky wall and stared at his enemy.

“What—what kind of trick was that?” he managed to say hoarsely.

The great beast was much stronger. The huge head was higher, and the black eyes were watching him intently. “It was no trick, Boy Jaim. You saw a little of what really happened, exactly as it happened. Surely you’ve heard of the Pool of Knowledge?”

“Y-yes.”

“Then you know that nothing is lost, ever. What you saw was there in the past. I merely helped you to see it.”

Boy Jaim swallowed. “And the future—it is also there, and you can see it as clearly?”

“I can see it—but it is never as clear, for it has not yet happened. Often the

details are obscure. You are one of the details, Boy Jaim, that has given me trouble."

"I—I don't understand."

"Our fight is not finished," the great beast told him warningly, as muscles rippled under the golden hide. "We are only at a stalemate. If you are wise, you will kill me now while you still have the chance. Soon I will be as strong as ever."

Boy Jaim retreated. Grimly he caught up his bow again. "If only you hadn't killed poor Doubtful …"

"I am truly sorry about your dog. Truly. I had no intention of hurting it."

"I see. You intended only to get rid of me."

"Of course, Boy Jaim."

"But why?" he cried. "Why?"

"Because of what you are. You are not like the others of your kind. If I had killed you, it is almost certain that the race of man would soon be ended—and that other creatures would finally have a chance. But now—who knows? So long as you are alive, I cannot see the end."

Boy Jaim looked at the monster in astonishment. "You—you mean you were afraid I might be able to see into the Pool of Knowledge and warn people in time to save them?"

"There was that possibility."

"But I can't!" he said bitterly. "I haven't learned how. All I know is that the thing—whatever it is—is almost on us."

Abruptly he raised the bow. "But *you* know!" he cried in a shaking voice. "You murderous scheming devil, you've tricked me and killed my dog and done everything you could to destroy my people. What's going to happen? Tell me! Tell me fast—or I'll drive every arrow I've got into you, and you'll burn and burn inside, and burn again—"

"Shoot! I wish you would." The obsidian eyes glittered. "You did me no favor when you gave me water and saved my life. I have lived far too long. And all alone. You do not know what it is to be forever alone, for years without end … and wander the empty islands, and the wastes of the world …"

Boy Jaim stood trembling, momentarily speechless. In the terrible urgency of the moment he had entirely forgotten the heat. How do you tear information from a creature so obdurate, so fearless of death, so immune to threat?

"Oh, please!" he begged desperately. "Please help me! How can you condemn people for what they did so long ago? It's not right! They've changed. Can't you *see* that?"

"Changed? Nonsense! Don't you know that they've always done something no other creature has ever been guilty of—and that the evil is still in them?"

"W-what's that?"

"For time out of mind they've slaughtered their own kind—and in numbers beyond count."

"No!"

"Yes. It happened right here in the Barrens. Your ancestors killed their own kind, by the millions. Worse, they upset a balance and entirely destroyed the world that used to be."

"No! No! Impossible! They couldn't—"

"Look at me."

Once more, against his will, a power gripped his mind and commanded: *Gaze again into the past.*

In a flash the ravine vanished. Boy Jaim was thunderstruck to find himself in the midst of a nightmare more horrible than anything he had ever been able to imagine. He was in a monstrous city during its final hours.

Madness and fear and fury were everywhere. Hordes of people trampled each other, fighting to get underground. There was the scream of sirens, the roar of motors that jammed the tangled ribbons of streets, and in the blackening skies a constant thunder while little ships darted like frightened fish. Then abruptly sky and earth were rent by titanic forces. The mounting bedlam turned to a shuddering silence while the city's steel and stone dripped down like melted candlewax …

Boy Jaim was unable even to cry out. He fell trembling as he felt the long-past shifting of the planet on its axis. Then followed the sting of poisonous mists, the rush of great winds, the bite of unbelievable heat and cold, and the pounding of mighty waters as the seas rushed over the land. Time swirled around him with its gnawing centuries. Finally, there was only the quiet of sea sand and rubble about him, but still he saw the horror he had witnessed. He clawed to his feet and ran.

He ran blindly through the growing heat, fleeing an ever-present past that refused to leave him. Rubble tripped him and he went sliding over scorching sand. It seared him and drove him up and on. When he fell again he was in the comparative coolness of shadow. Just ahead was a puddle of rainwater in the hollow of a rock. He crawled to it, gasping, and buried his face in it.

The earth still seemed to be shaking under him, but it was some time before his vision partially cleared and he was able to separate past and present. He looked around.

He was in the upper part of the ravine where it sloped into the Barrens. Through the shimmering heat he could see the great bear silhouetted at a curve behind him. The monster was on its feet now, apparently fully recovered. He saw it start swiftly toward him, then suddenly stop as the earth shook again and rubble fell into the ravine.

The predicted earthquakes had come.

Suddenly he was aware that a frightened L'Mara was calling, and had been trying to get his attention for some time.

"*Boy Jaim! Boy Jaim!*" she was saying frantically. "*Where are you? Please answer me!*"

"*I—I'm in the Barrens,*" he managed to say dazedly. "*I'm all right—but you—Is the ground shaking? …*"

"*Yes, but we've all gone outside to be safe. It's horribly hot, so mother and I and all the neighbors have gone into that little lake below the house. It's fairly cool under the trees here, and it's about the safest place around …*" Then suddenly, anxiously. "*Boy Jaim! What's wrong? You're in danger—I can feel it!*"

It came to him at that moment that her danger was greater than his, and that everyone at home should get back inside as quickly as possible. But he was still dazed from the terrors the Golden One had thrust upon him, and it was hard to pull his thoughts together. The bear, he saw, was coming toward him again. There was deadly purpose in the creature's movements.

Boy Jaim groped for his bow, then in despair realized he must have dropped it during his flight. He scrambled to his feet and ran.

"*L'Mara!*" he called, as he raced over the trembling sand. "*Get back in the house! Hurry! Send an emergency call for everyone to do the same.*"

"*But—but the quakes—the ground's still shaking—*"

"*The houses can take it—especially the older ones. They were built for tempests we've forgotten. Get back inside—tell everyone to take all their blankets to the lower levels. They must go as far back in the ground as they can, and keep every door closed …*"

For long seconds the connection between them was broken, and he knew she must be having trouble urging the others away from the imagined safety of the cooling lake. Then she called in fright, "*When is it coming? How much time—*"

"*You—you have only minutes,*" he gasped, with a quick backward look at the bear. "*It'll be from the east—you'll feel it first. A wind—*"

Until this instant he hadn't known what it was, but now in his desperation the tormenting visions of the past cleared away, and he saw in a flash what lay ahead.

"*We're on the edge of a great cosmic dust cloud,*" he told her quickly. "*It caused the heat. But in a few minutes it will darken the sun, and there'll be a wind—a terrible wind that will turn the air over and bring instant cold. If that cold touches you, you'll die in seconds. Get down in the lower level! Hurry!*"

"*B-but what about you? What will you do? How—*"

"*Forget about me—I'll manage all right. Do as I tell you!*"

With an effort he closed his mind to her, hiding the sudden helplessness he felt. Then he stopped running and turned to face the great bear.

The Golden One had paused some distance behind him, at the edge of the ravine. The brazen sky was already darkening. A little wind had sprung up, sending the hot sand swirling about him.

For a long moment the beast stood motionless, silently looking at him. Finally, the great head nodded as if to say: *You win, Boy Jaim. Your eyes have been opened*. Then, slowly, it turned and started back down into the ravine.

Boy Jaim watched it disappear. Now a loneliness such as he had never known swept over him. My eyes have been opened, he thought. But why did it have to happen so late?

In a few minutes he would die. He wanted so badly to live—only there was no place to go. Not here in the Barrens. There were many caves he knew of that might offer protection, but they were so far away that not even the fastest sled could have taken him to one in time.

Some of the caves were huge, and he wondered if the Golden One could have sent the forest creatures to them for safety. The thought had no sooner come to him than he knew it was true. He felt a quick glow of happiness.

Then the day began to darken rapidly and he heard the moaning of rising wind. The first great rush of it filled the world with flying sand and drove him head-long into the ravine, to go tumbling and rolling until he was well below the level of the Barrens. But hardly had he got his breath when the wind became a shriek, and abruptly it was cold.

He cried out against the agony of a cold that almost numbed him in his tracks,

then he saw the huge golden shape looming before him, beckoning with outstretched paws, offering protection.

He ran forward, and the mighty paws encircled him and drew him down, and he was enveloped and covered in a warmth of fur that shut out every prodding point of the knifing wind. “Rest, Boy Jaim,” the great beast said. “And tell L’Mara there is nothing more to fear. The heat of my body will keep you warm until this is over.”

More About a Star

The youngest herder hurried through the deepening twilight and climbed the slope to where the oldest herder waited. It was too early for his star to be up, but his eyes kept straying to the horizon where it always appeared. Again he wondered about the strangeness of its color last night. Had it really turned red—or had it just seemed that way because of something in the atmosphere?

The oldest herder had been very curious, and the two of them had watched it for over an hour until the mist came and blotted out everything overhead.

Now the sky was clear. How would his star look tonight?

Then abruptly he forgot it when he reached the crest of the slope and saw that the oldest herder was holding something in his arms.

"Say, what have you got there?"

"A present for you," the oldest herder said quietly.

"A—a present?" The youngest herder stared at the small dim shape held out to him, then exclaimed in delight, "it's a puppy!"

"Yes," said the oldest herder. "I thought it was about time you had another dog."

The youngest herder stammered his thanks and sat down on the grass, clinging to his new friend. His heart overflowed.

He was not aware of the passage of time until he heard the oldest herder say, "There it is—your star! It's red tonight. Much redder than last night."

The youngest herder's hands tightened on the dog as he turned and looked. It was true. His star was very red tonight, so red that it was almost frightening.

"What—what's wrong with it?" he whispered.

"I don't know, son. But there must be a reason …"

They watched the star while it climbed slowly into the heavens.

Suddenly the youngest herder gasped, "It's fading!"

There was no question about it. It really was fading. Incredulous, the two stared at it. The star was high over the hills now, but it was becoming dimmer by the minute. It was fading away.

All at once it was gone. It had vanished completely.

For a long while the two watchers sat wordless, staring at where the star had been. The youngest herder clutched his dog for comfort and thought of the planet that was surely out there. What had happened to it? He gave a silent but earnest prayer for its people, and for all the creatures on that distant whirling ball. Then, because he had the strange feeling that something of great importance had been settled, he gave an extra prayer for all those who might be concerned.

Finally, a cold nose touched his cheek and a warm tongue licked happily at his face. He sighed and asked, "What could have happened out yonder?"

"Who knows? There are clouds in space. Perhaps a great cloud is hiding it."

"Do—do you suppose it will ever come back?"

The oldest herder did not reply at once. Then he nodded and said, "Yes, I believe so. I believe it will shine again."

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets*: *A Little Robot, Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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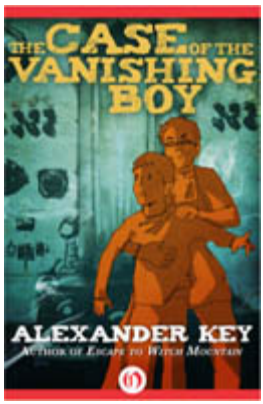

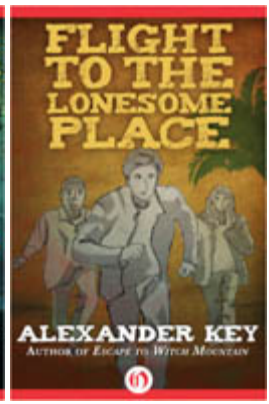

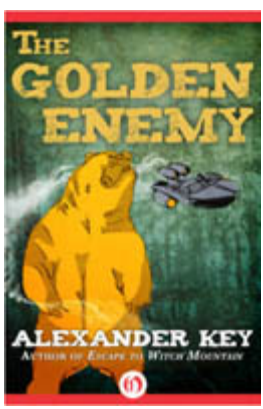

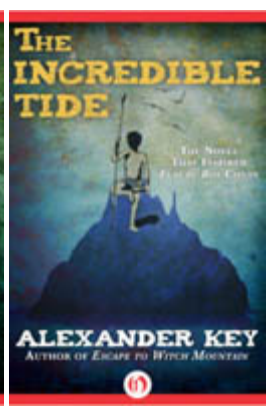

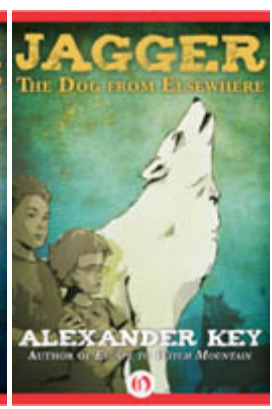

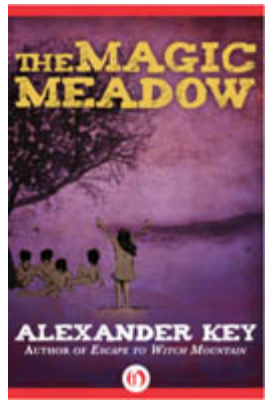

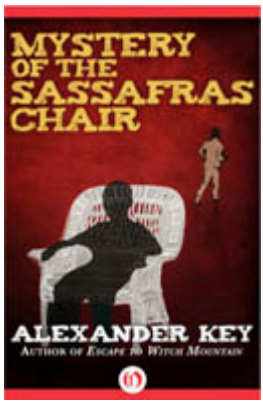

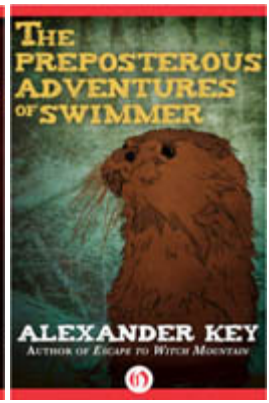

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